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ABSTRACT

This course, one of 16 sequential courses comprising phase one of a part-time Bachelor of Arts degree program in Australian Studies, introduces debate over the forms, functions, and political implications of public opinion. It pays particular attention to opinion polls and the news media and the way public opinion is produced. It is designed for independent study combined with tutorial sessions. Chapter 1 is an introduction to the course and its study objectives. Chapter 2, "Agencies of Opinion Formation," deals with opinion polling in Australia, polling and the 1936 American presidential election, and the influence of the press. Chapter 3, "Public Opinion: Definitions and Debates," discusses opinions and attitudes, both public and private, and problems with the concept of public opinion. Chapter 4, "Public Opinion and Democracy," deals with the effects of public opinion polling and the manufacture of opinion. The conclusion examines the broader implications of the material covered in the preceding chapters. Materials for the first tutorial session examine newspaper articles dealing with polling; the second deals with a television program that examines the effect of the media in shaping opinion about crime. Also included are lists of required readings, additional readings, a bibliography, and self-assessment questions. (IS)

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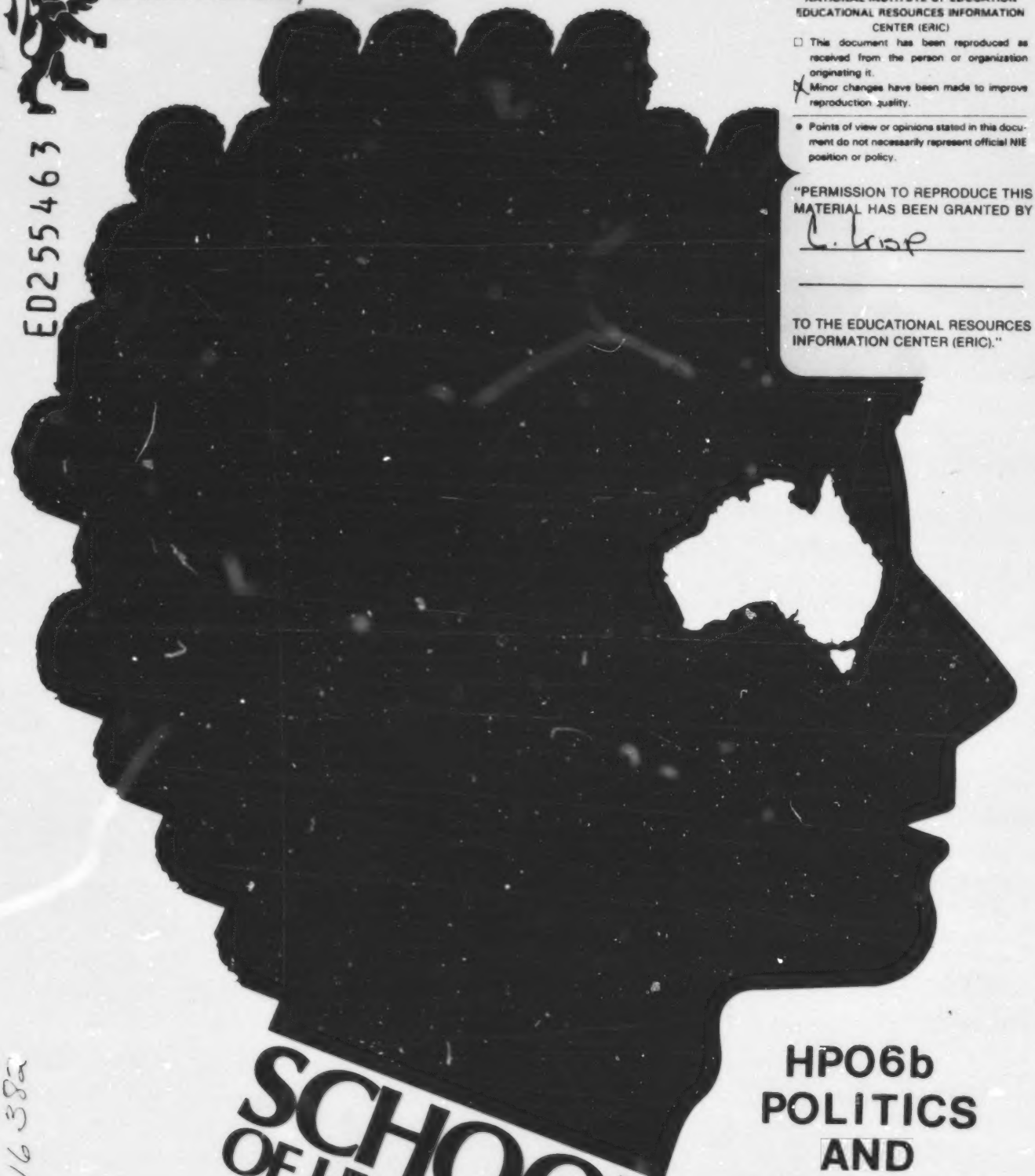

SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES

HPO6b
POLITICS
AND
OPINION

50/016 38a

PART TIME BA DEGREE

GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES

PART-TIME BA DEGREE PROGRAMME

COURSE HP06b

POLITICS AND OPINION

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CONTENTS

		Page
	Course information	1
	List of readings	3
1	Introduction to the course and its study objectives	4
1.1	Who puts 'the public' into 'public opinion'?	4
1.2	Some examples	5
1.3	Course aims and objectives	9
2	Agencies of opinion formation	12
2.1	The formation of opinion	12
2.2	Opinion polling: the Australian context	14
2.3	The lessons of 1936	16
2.4	The will of the people	23
2.5	The press and the 'platform'	28
2.6	Summary and review	34
3	Public opinion: definitions and debates	36
3.1	What's in a word?	36
3.2	Opinions/attitudes	37
3.3	Public/private	39
3.4	Public opinion: some definitions	46
3.5	Public opinion doesn't exist, but its effects are real	52
4	Public opinion and democracy	56
4.1	Public opinion and politics	56
4.2	Poll-itics	57
4.3	Public opinion/popular opinion: a conservative view	63
4.4	The manufacture of opinion	70
5	Conclusion	73
	Tutorial one	75
	Tutorial two	77
	Bibliography	78
	Further reading	80
	Answers to Self-Assessment Questions	81

Course readings

There is no set book for this course, all of the required readings being enclosed with this study guide. There are sixteen such readings, grouped and listed under sections 2, 3 and 4 of the study guide. The bibliography at the end of the study guide gives full details for each of these readings should you wish to consult the texts from which they are taken. In addition, there is a list of further readings for those of you with the time and interest to follow up particular themes or problems in greater detail.

Tutorial activities

There are two optional tutorials associated with the course. These are designed to illustrate the arguments developed in the course materials and to give you the opportunity of practically applying some of the methods of analysis the course introduces.

The first tutorial will be organised around a series of activities on and discussions of some of the different forms in which public opinion is produced and represented. Although not essential, it will be helpful if you can have read as far as the end of section 1 in preparation for this tutorial.

The second tutorial will be organised around a viewing and discussion of a television programme which examines the part played by the media in forming public opinion. This will introduce you to the concerns of section 4.4 of the study guide, although it is not essential that you should have reached this point in the course in order to attend and benefit from this tutorial. However, you will be presumed to have read as far as the end of section 2 and, preferably, to have started section 3. There will also be an opportunity to discuss the assessment item at this tutorial. Further details concerning both tutorials are contained at the end of the study guide.

Study activities

This course makes use of two types of study activities. First, SAQs are used to direct your attention to specific aspects of some of the course readings. Specimen answers to these can be found at the back of the study guide. In the case of other readings, where our concern is to direct your attention to the more general aspects of the argument, you are asked to answer a series of study questions. These are not answered directly in the study guide. However, they are referred to in the comments which follow these readings in the main body of the study guide. The purpose of these comments is to develop and expand upon the issues to which the study questions refer.

Assessment item

First, the good news: there is only one assessment item for this course. Now the bad news: it's somewhat longer than those to which you have hitherto been accustomed. You will be asked to write an essay of 2000 words in answer to one of the three essay questions contained in the assessment item. Each of these questions is designed to test your comprehension of different aspects of the course. They are thus intended to assess your ability to distinguish between those aspects of the course which are relevant to the question you choose and those which are not. In view of this, you would be well advised to read through these questions before you start the course and to bear them in mind as you work your way through it.

LIST OF READINGS

Readings are numbered in order of use, and aggregated according to the section of the study guide in which they first appear.

Section 2 (pink cover)

Reading 1. Bill Maley, 'The opinion polls' (excerpts)

Reading 2. Daniel Katz and Hadley Cantril, 'Public opinion polls' (excerpts)

Reading 3. George Gallup and Saul Rae, 'The voices of the people' (excerpts)

Reading 4. Walter Shepard, 'Public opinion' (excerpts)

Reading 5. Irving Crespi, 'Polls as journalism' (excerpts)

Section 3 (cream cover)

Reading 6. Donald Fleming, 'Attitude: the history of a concept' (excerpts)

Reading 7. Richard Sennett, 'The changes in the public domain' (excerpts)

Reading 8. Jurgen Habermas, 'The public sphere' (excerpts)

Reading 9. Wilhelm Bauer, 'Public opinion' (excerpt)

Reading 10. Paul Lazarsfeld, 'Public opinion research and the classical tradition' (excerpts)

Reading 11. Tom Harrisson, 'What is public opinion?' (excerpts)

Reading 12. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Public opinion does not exist'

Section 4 (yellow cover)

Reading 13. Murray Goot, 'Monitoring the public, marketing the parties' (excerpts)

Reading 14. Leon Bramson, 'The concept of collective behaviour' (excerpts)

Reading 15. Robert Nisbet, 'Public opinion versus popular opinion' (excerpts)

Reading 16. Stuart Hall *et al.*, 'The social production of news' (excerpts)

1 INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE AND ITS STUDY OBJECTIVES

1.1 Who puts 'the public' into 'public opinion'?

We have already encountered, in earlier courses, a number of terms - 'national identity' and 'tradition', for instance - whose meanings, through familiarity, seem to be quite obvious and unproblematic. In their ordinary, everyday usage, such terms tend to be used and understood as if their meaning were perfectly clear and self-evident. Yet, as we have seen, they can mean quite different things to and for different people in different historical and social contexts.

In this course, we have a similar term on our hands: 'public opinion'. At one level, its meaning would seem to be quite clear: it is perhaps most typically taken to refer to the opinions which the public hold on some matter of shared or general concern. This is the sense of the term which is implied when, in public opinion polls, it is said that public opinion favours the introduction of harsher penalties for serious criminal offences or when, in election periods, public opinion is said to be running in favour of one party or another. On further inspection, however, such definitions prove to be far from watertight. They rest on presupposed categories which, once examined, turn out to be quite problematic. Take the notion of 'opinion'. What, exactly, is an opinion, and how does it differ from, say, a belief or an attitude? And how is holding an opinion different from, say, claiming knowledge about a particular subject? Nor is the situation any more clear-cut with regard to 'public'. Is 'public opinion' the opinion of everyone? Or just of the majority? In short, who counts as a member of 'the public' where opinions are held to constitute 'public opinion'? Or, to take another contrast: what is the relationship between 'public opinion' and 'private opinion'? Is 'public opinion' merely 'private opinion' made public? Or are 'private opinions' transformed in the process of being made public?

These are some of the questions we shall consider in this course. For the greater part, we shall do so by examining public opinion polls and the various debates - theoretical, political and methodological - which have surrounded their development. According to their exponents, opinion polls are held to reflect public opinion as accurately as is possible within the limitations of existing scientific techniques of polling. One of our major concerns will be to dispute this view. Rather than reflecting public opinion, accurately or otherwise, we shall contend that opinion polls - together with related phenomena, such as elections - constitute a specific mechanism for the production of public opinion. Moreover, in producing public opinion, opinion polls also represent such opinion in particular ways with quite discernible political consequences.

In developing these arguments, we shall review the historical formation of opinion polls, critically assess the methods they use and outline some of the contrasting evaluations which have been offered regarding their impact on the political processes of parliamentary democracies. In doing so, we shall broaden the scope of our discussion to consider the relationship between opinion polls and the news media. This will involve outlining the respects in which, between them, polling organisations and news media actively contribute to the formation of public opinion rather than simply passively reflecting it or neutrally reporting it.

Finally, we shall extend the range of issues to be considered in the course in two further directions. First, we shall explore the historical distinctiveness of the opposition public/private which public opinion polls both require and produce as conditions of their own intelligibility. This will entail examining the emergence of the concept of a 'public sphere', a quite modern notion referring to a distinctive set of social institutions whose development has been closely brought up with that of industrial capitalism. Second, we shall review the contrasting assessments offered by a range of political theorists regarding the operation of those political systems, such as parliamentary democracies, within which public opinion is allowed a bearing on the decision-making process as well as on the conditions under which rival groups compete for political power.

A lot of issues! Before detailing them more precisely, however, let us consider a few examples in order to identify our concerns more concretely.

1.2 Some examples

Example 1

You will probably be familiar with the political context here. After crossing the floor to vote with the Labor Party and Liberal backbenchers in 1983, Terry White was dismissed from his ministerial position for breaking Cabinet solidarity. He announced a challenge for the leadership of the parliamentary Liberal Party. The premier then declared that he would never work with White. Thus the future of the coalition and of the Liberal Party Cabinet Ministers, as well as the prospects of the Liberal Party in the forthcoming state election, all hinged on the outcome of the leadership contest. In this context, the *Courier-Mail* published the results of a hastily conducted poll commissioned by supporters of White.

> POLL SHOWS PUBLIC BACKS WHITE
>
> A survey through Brisbane suburbs yesterday has given sacked Liberal minister, Mr. Terry White, a clear approval margin in the Liberal Party leadership stakes.

The survey showed that 56.7 percent of those polled preferred Mr. White to the current leader, Dr. Edwards, and more than 66 percent approved of voting with the ALP in Parliament last Thursday.

The survey was done by Market Facts Queensland Pty. Ltd. The company's chief executive, Mr. Mark Troy, said last night the company did all survey work for the Liberal Party in Queensland.

Mr. White said last night a group of Redcliffe businessmen who supported him had commissioned the survey.

Mr. Troy said the survey covered 300 people and was a standard size with 50 starting points chosen by a random method through Brisbane. Six households were surveyed from each starting point.

Those surveyed were asked for their reaction to Mr. White's action in crossing the floor of the House and their preference for leadership between Mr. White and Dr. Edwards.

Mr. White's actions were approved by 66.7 percent with 21 percent saying they did not know and 12.3 percent disapproving. On the leadership issue, 56.7 percent preferred Mr. White, 14 percent did not know and 29.3 percent preferred Dr. Edwards.

Another group of figures released were for 'thinking, uncommitted voters' - Mr. Troy said these were people who voted on performance and policy statements of a party, but did not believe they were committed to a particular party - which made up 47 percent of the total. (*Courier-Mail*, 8 August, 1983)

Our interests here centre less on the results of this poll than in the way those results are represented in the newspaper item. Note, firstly, that public opinion is represented in a particular form or, more accurately, in two forms: in the language of the headline, 'Poll shows public backs White'; and in the form of a distribution of opinion in percentage terms. Contrary to the implications of the headline, however, the percentages show that White was backed not by an undifferentiated 'public opinion' but by majorities which, moreover, differed in size in relation to two different issues - White's in crossing the floor to vote with the ALP, and his bid for the leadership of the Liberal Party. Furthermore, the precise significance of these majorities can be interpreted in different ways. Since the poll was not confined to members of the Liberal Party, there is an obvious ambiguity in what 'approval' or 'preference' for White might have meant. Those Labor Party supporters polled could well have expressed a preference for White as Liberal leader not because he would enhance the electoral

prospects of the Liberal Party but because his leadership would jeopardise the National-Liberal coalition and thus assist Labor's bid for office.

In sum, then, the appearance of this report should be thought of not so much as a record, whether accurate or inaccurate, of past opinion, but as a means for making future opinion. Or rather, it produces a particular representation of public opinion in the interest of influencing the formation of opinion within a particular public (i.e., the Liberal Party, and especially its parliamentary wing). Given that the poll was commissioned by supporters of White, the example suggests that polling, rather than providing a neutral record of public opinion, is often employed in the service of groups with an interest in fashioning public opinion to further their own political objectives.

Example 4

In recent years, a number of calls have been made for a national referendum to be held to clarify the question of whether Australia should mine, manufacture and export uranium. Uncertainties caused by vacillating government policies, it is argued, have had debilitating effects on the mining industry, have jeopardised relations with overseas purchasers, and so on. A national referendum, its advocates have suggested, would at least resolve interminable debate and hopefully produce an unequivocal public verdict for policy makers to consider. A spokesperson for the anti-uranium/nuclear movements responded on ABC radio by questioning whether the result of such a referendum could really be taken as an expression of public opinion on this issue. Since the forces involved in referendum campaigning would be, on the one side, a multiplicity of small, poorly funded ecology, anti-nuclear and suchlike groups, and, on the other side, huge multi-national mining companies with their formidable financial resources and publicity machines, the result could simply reflect the unequal resources available to the contending parties. Money would speak rather than public opinion. She therefore suggested that the result of a small local government ballot which declared the Shire of Bega a nuclear-free zone would be a more valid index of public opinion since it was conducted outside the orbit of big publicity.

In this example, two devices for registering public opinion are contrasted, not because one records opinion accurately and the other does not, but because they record two different sorts of opinion formed in different ways, one in response to the publicity mechanisms in operation at the national level and the other in response to agencies of opinion formation in operation at a local level. Yet it is also argued that only one of these is 'genuine public opinion'. Lurking here is a 'normative theory', a theory of what public opinion should be: i.e., a process of reaching a conclusion by rational means unaffected by promotional propaganda and, by implication, appeals to the irrational.

This example suggests that public opinion is not an undifferentiated unity. There may be more than one public opinion on the same issue depending on what is regarded as the appropriate context for the canvassing of opinion. Equally, it suggests that public opinion cannot be conceived as existing independently of the possibly quite different pressures which might be brought to bear on it in other contexts.

Example 3

Political disputes often revolve around competing definitions of the issue under contention. The Franklin Dam was presented, by the Tasmanian Government, as essential to the state's energy policy and as a means of employment. The anti-dam campaigners, while paying attention to both the energy resources and employment arguments, primarily defined the issue in terms of the preservation of a unique wilderness area. These competing definitions not only underpinned the cases that the contending parties presented to the public; they also implied different 'relevant publics'. The pro-dam advocates maintained the matter was one for Tasmanians alone, and for the elected representatives of Tasmanians in particular. By defining the Franklin area as part of the national heritage, however, the anti-dam campaigners expanded the relevant public to include all Australians and shifted decision-making responsibility to the federal government. By extension, since it was argued that the Franklin area was part of the global heritage, literally everybody in the world could be a potential contributor to public opinion on the issue. Partly because the anti-dam forces addressed 'all Australians' and campaigned so extensively on the mainland, the federal government became involved and the issue became one of states' rights versus the constitutional powers of the Commonwealth.

Struggles for public opinion, this example suggests, thus involve questions of the scope and nature of relevant publics - who can speak on an issue, who is affected by it - and how the issue is defined. Generalising from this, many forms of political dispute are centred precisely around competing conceptions of which sections of 'the public' should be taken into account in assessing 'public opinion' on a given issue.

Example 4

In the early 1970s, a very peculiar actor entered the American political scene. It was called 'the silent majority' or sometimes, 'middle America', and was characterised in terms of a complex of social concerns and fears about the direction the country was allegedly taking: the spread of permissiveness and the erosion of traditional moral values; the devaluing of work and initiative due to the expansion of welfare; assaults on the family and traditional sex roles. The 'silent majority' was said to

value law and order, discipline, hard work and national pride. But its concerns were invisible: neglected by Big Government; distracted by the demands of vocal minorities; ignored by media which were owned by the Eastern establishment and staffed by drug-gobbling, long-haired trendies; and, of course, derided by humanist intellectuals.

The 'silence' of this majority was certainly convenient for the conservative politicians who could thus pose as its mouthpiece. But there is an interesting problem, here, in the paradox of a form of opinion which somehow could not take a public form until someone voiced its unspoken thoughts. Once politicians like Richard Nixon and his Vice-President, Spiro Agnew, began invoking 'the silent majority', others picked up on the term and it moved into more general circulation. Newspaper editorials and magazines increasingly referred to 'the silent majority' as if its existence was self-evident. Even liberal Democratic Party politicians, by campaigning under 'law and order' slogans and the like, began to act as if the silent majority was a powerful force in the electorate. The 'silent majority', meaning 'the attitudes common to a majority of "ordinary" Americans towards a particular set of issues', was thus a constructed category, a 'form' of public opinion, which had important effects on the 'formation' of public opinion. Insofar as the issues supposedly of concern to the silent majority became priorities on the political agenda, and insofar as politicians and the media increasingly addressed people as members of 'the silent majority', it seems reasonable to suggest that individuals would be more likely both to actually form an opinion on such issues and to do so in terms of what other 'ordinary Americans' supposedly already thought.

We will encounter other ways in which the 'as if' principle of public opinion works - pollsters who claim to measure opinion as if that opinion exists independently of the questions they ask and the measures they use; political parties which claim to represent the will of the people as if they themselves played no part in forming that will. But, to conclude this section, we can note that political representations of public opinion often have an air of 'self-fulfilling prophesy' about them. Nixon's invocation of the silent majority functioned analogously to the cover blurb on a new paperback which announces 'The latest bestseller by ...'. The book is promoted as if already a great success to increase the possibility that it will become one.

1.3 Course aims and objectives

It is now possible to state our aims more precisely. They are:

1. To assess the part that public opinion polls play in relation to the processes by which public opinion

assumes a determinate political shape, form and significance. This will involve regarding opinion polls as agencies of opinion formation to be considered in the light of their relations to other such agencies - the press, for example.

2. To consider the problems of definition associated with the term 'public opinion'. However, rather than aiming to sift through the various available definitions with a view to advancing a 'correct' definition of our own, our purpose is to consider the effect of different definitions. We shall contend that there can be no such thing as a single or 'correct' definition of public opinion - merely a range of different definitions with different effects.

3. To place these definitions in a historical perspective by considering the development of the range of meanings currently associated with the term 'public opinion' and their relationship to adjacent concepts - those of popular opinion, the people, or the masses, for example. This will involve paying particular attention to the distinction public/private which, in turn, will involve us in historical debates concerning the emergence of the 'public sphere' - a term applied to the specific set of institutions within which, in contemporary societies, public opinion is said to emerge and to assume determinate forms.

4. To review the contrasting reactions of political theorists of different persuasions to the significance accorded to public opinion within contemporary democratic political systems. This will involve examining the views of liberal-democratic and Marxist theorists as well as those of more conservatively inclined traditions of political thought.

Initially. we shall develop these concerns by means of a polemic with the views of opinion polls advanced by polling organisations and their advocates. According to such views, as we have noted, opinion polls are held to constitute accurate reflections of the state of public opinion on a given topic at a given moment. Or, if it is conceded that polls do not provide an entirely accurate reflection of public opinion, this is usually attributed to technical difficulties associated with the design and administration of opinion polls. Whilst such concessions are important, they keep alive the notion that, in principle, an entirely accurate means of reflecting and measuring public opinion is possible.

Our contention to the contrary will be that the development of an accurate means for reflecting or measuring public opinion is impossible in principle. This is because, we shall argue, it is not possible to identify or locate any such thing as a public opinion which exists independently of the various devices and mechanisms - such as opinion polls,

elections and referenda - which are used to 'measure' it. These do not reflect or simply measure a pre-existing public opinion; rather, they produce and represent opinions in particular forms. It is in this sense that Pierre Bourdieu argues, in reading 12, that 'public opinion does not exist'. Bourdieu's purpose in advancing this seemingly outrageous proposition is not to argue that the subject of public opinion is unimportant. Rather, it is to introduce a shift in the way the subject is normally conceived. His concern is to displace attempts to devise accurate and valid means for measuring and recording public opinion and to put in their place an examination of (a) the various means and mechanisms whereby different public opinions are produced, and (b) their effects. Our overarching purpose in this course is to follow and develop the trajectory of this argument and to examine some of its implications.

2 AGENCIES OF OPINION FORMATION

2.1 The formation of opinion

Our purpose in this part of the course is to examine the formation of public opinion. The concept of formation, however, is somewhat ambiguous since it encompasses a range of different meanings. It may thus refer, for example, to the manner in which a phenomenon is formed - that is, to the processes and pressures through which it is moulded into a particular shape. Or in another closely related usage - 'rock formation', for example - it may refer to the finally achieved shape of a phenomenon, to its configuration. To be clear about our purposes, therefore, it will be useful to distinguish between a set of different but related questions:

1. First, we shall be concerned with the forms in which public opinion can be said to express or manifest itself. These are multitudinous. One thinks of elections, opinion polls and other formal or informal surveys, referenda, delegations, petitions, boycotts, demonstrations and mass meetings, letters and telephone calls (e.g. to politicians or news media). Also, it is often said that when formal mechanisms for political expression are circumscribed, public opinion takes the form of the anti-regime joke, the satirical song, graffiti or gossip. But if we think of public opinion in a broad sense as popular opinions or attitudes, the range of phenomena which could be interrogated for evidence of such opinion becomes very diverse indeed. Popular novels, for example, are frequently examined, not in terms of the presence or absence of certain literary qualities, but as reflecting or expressing popular sentiment on a specific issue or during a certain period.

This first set of concerns requires that we must consider the circumstances and conditions in which a given phenomenon can be considered as an instance of public opinion. It is not self-evident, for instance, that popular novels should be analysed as repositories of evidence on public opinion. To do so presupposes both an argument - e.g. along the lines that to be popular a novel must reflect the attitudes and sentiments common to its intended readership - and the use of certain reading techniques that will enable the novel to be read as an index of public opinion.

2. Second, we can also examine the forces which bear upon the formation of public opinion. Unless we assume that public opinion creates itself spontaneously and in a kind of social vacuum, it is necessary to consider the factors which determine or limit the opinions that individuals/publics have regarding political issues. In some accounts, the processes of influence are depicted as malign - the public mind is manipulated, moulded, distorted by propaganda

appeals, consent is 'manufactured', public rationality is inhibited by censorships of various sorts and so on. But, whether or not the influences are represented as undesirable and all-powerful, this second sense of 'formation' typically directs attention to the activities of political parties and the campaigns of pressure groups as well as to the influence of advertising and public relations organisations and to the mass media.

3. Finally, public opinion appears in and is formed by the contexts in which it is called on or appealed to. Imagine a newspaper editorial which includes the comment 'Unlike a small but noisy minority, most Australians recognise that the government has acted in the interests of economic recovery'. Now there may or may not be evidence of what most Australians think on the issue. The point is that public opinion (which could easily substitute for 'most Australians' in this sentence) is constructed in terms of an opposition: on the one hand, a majority who sensibly and quietly acknowledge the priority of the national interest and, on the other, a minority, presumably motivated by self interest or ideological dogma. The 'form' that public opinion takes here is determined by the way in which that opinion is represented; that is, by the way in which a majority opinion is invoked at once to confirm editorial support for government policy and to discredit those who argue the opposite case. In this case, then, public opinion assumes a specific representational form as determined by the place that is assigned to it and by the functions it fulfils in the text of the editorial.

Our interests will centre particularly on the relations between these second and third aspects of 'the formation of public opinion': that is, on the part which the forms in which public opinion is represented (sense 3) play in relation to the formation of public opinion (sense 2). In the course of examining these relations, we shall also call into question - or at least qualify - the first set of concerns mentioned above. We shall suggest that all of the forms in which public opinion is commonly held to manifest itself - such as referenda, elections and petitions - do not so much express an opinion that was already there as represent public opinion in specific ways which actively contribute to its subsequent formation and development. In other words, public opinion is actively shaped by the forms in which it is represented.

We develop this argument, initially, by considering the early history of public opinion polls, showing how these might be more fruitfully regarded as agencies of public opinion formation rather than as reflections of public opinion. Subsequently, we shall develop this line of argument by considering in which respects, along with such organs as the press and television, public opinion polls form a part of a broader circuit of opinion formation.

2.2 Opinion polling: the Australian context

Let us first consider some of the relevant background to opinion polling in Australia.

****

Read Bill Maley, 'The opinion polls' (excerpts), reading 1.

****

SAQ 1

1. The explanations which Maley advances to account for the degree of variance which may exist between opinion poll reports of voting intentions and the actual patterns of voting behaviour exhibited on election days fall into three main types. What are these?

2. Does this reading offer any basis for suggesting that elections constitute a more reliable indicator of public opinion than opinion polls?

Comments

It is worth emphasising that there is no point in Maley's article at which one comes into contact with any such thing as 'real' or 'genuine' public opinion in a raw, unmodified form. Rather, different forms of measuring and representing public opinion - in the form of voting intentions in one case, and in the form of votes in the other - are compared and contrasted with one another. We never encounter public opinion which exists independently of these two different ways of representing it.

The implications of this will be further elaborated shortly. Meanwhile, it is worth exploring the Australian context a little further by outlining the historical and institutional background of the various polling organisations Maley mentions. A recent Australian media yearbook lists some one hundred firms engaged in the business of identifying and measuring consumers' attitudes, political opinions and the preferences and behaviour of media audiences. Those responsible for the opinion polls that are a staple item in your daily newspaper operate across all three fields. Besides producing the Morgan Gallup Poll surveys for the *Bulletin* each week, the Roy Morgan Research Centre conducts a weekly omnibus consumer survey (Consumer Opinion Trends); the Australian Social Barometer which 'relates people's psychographics (i.e., lifestyle) to their purchases, media habits and demographics'; *ad hoc* quantitative and qualitative surveys (the latter meaning group discussions and 'depth

interviews'); and print media readership surveys. Over recent years the Morgan Research Centre has also (unsuccessfully) challenged the monopoly on television ratings services held by McNair Anderson Associates. McNair Anderson produces the Australian Public Opinion Polls (The Gallup Method) for newspapers associated with the *Herald* and *Weekly Times* group, including the *Courier-Mail*, as well as providing the McNair Market Monitor omnibus surveys and 'all kinds of consumer, social and industrial research'.

Both firms can trace their origins to the beginnings of systematic commercial survey research in Australia. In 1941 Roy Morgan, then an employee of the *Melbourne Herald*, was sent by the paper's managing editor, Keith Murdoch, to the United States to study the Gallup method. He, and later the company he founded, operated the Gallup poll for the *Herald* until 1973 when McNair Anderson took over. The founders of the two firms which merged to form McNair Anderson in the early 1970s were both pioneers of radio research and ardent advocates of the 'scientific' measurement of consumer habits and preferences. W.A. McNair, research director for a large American-owned advertising agency, was the first to systematically measure the Australian radio audience, a topic on which he published a book in 1937. George Anderson produced audience surveys for the newly-formed Macquarie network in the early 1940s before setting up his own survey organisation, the Anderson Analysis of Broadcasting, in 1944.

The Gallup poll remained the only opinion poll operating on a national basis until 1970 when Australian Nation-wide Opinion Polls (ANOP) began. The latter was set up by Rupert Murdoch's News Ltd. in association with the British National Opinion Polls organisation, although it later became an independent concern. The 1972 federal election was the first campaign monitored by competing polling organisations and during the 1970s poll results became an increasingly prominent aspect of the media coverage, both of politics generally and of election campaigns in particular. Further, not only did the parties pay close attention to the published poll information, they came increasingly to commission their own surveys. Thus extensive polling has been done for the Liberal Party by the Morgan Research Centre while ANOP has provided a similar service for the ALP and its managing director, Rod Cameron, has been an important contributor to the formation of Labor electoral strategy over the last decade.

From this brief review we can derive several important points.

Firstly, information on polled opinion is not provided as a disinterested public service but is produced by enterprises which are in the business of providing a particular type of product to those who can afford to pay for it. This fact is not always recognised. A 1976 American survey, designed to check people's awareness of

opinion polls during an election campaign, found that over a quarter of the respondents thought that such polls were conducted by some agency of government.

Secondly, and more specifically, opinion polling on political issues has been initiated (a) by the press and news media as, among other things, a means to fill news space, and (b) by commercial market research firms which envisaged political polling as a 'natural' extension of their existing media audience and consumer surveys.

Thirdly, there is the more recent development, in Australia at least, of political parties as poll sponsors. Poll data has thus come to be integrated into complex marketing strategies in the political as well as in the commercial field. In the following section, we will take up some of the implications of these points. We will examine:

1. the development of election-oriented polling;

2. the comparison of opinion polls and elections as indicators of public opinion;

3. connections between opinion polls and the press;

4. claims regarding the political functions and consequences of opinion polling.

Initially, we explore these issues by reviewing the debates which surrounded the early use of opinion polling in America where, as the saying goes, 'it all began'.

2.3 The lessons of 1936

The early career of George Gallup provides a convenient illustration of the context within which opinion polling emerged. In his 1928 doctoral dissertation, entitled 'An Objective Method for Determining Reader-Interest in the Content of a Newspaper', Gallup argued that newspapers needed to replace their traditional reliance on 'hit and miss methods' with scientifically-conducted surveys of reader preferences for different types of news and feature material. While teaching journalism, he conducted his first political poll for his mother-in-law who was running for office in a state election. He then set up the first large-scale research department for a major New York advertising agency and began experimenting with the surveys that led to the founding of the American Institute of Public Opinion in 1935. The Institute conducted weekly surveys of opinion on political and social issues and syndicated these under the title 'America speaks' to a number of American newspapers. While Gallup was best known for the A.I.P.O. polls he remained active in other fields. He ran an advertising/ market research firm in partnership with Claude Robinson, a political science professor, author of an early volume on 'straw polls' and later a pollster for Richard

Nixon. And in the mid thirties he also set up the Audience Research Institute which provided a range of research services for Hollywood movie studios. (One of its more notable findings was that the American public was opposed to the prospect of Vivien Leigh playing Scarlett in *Gone With the Wind*.)

For Gallup, as for the other pollsters mentioned in our next reading (Roper, a market researcher, and Crossley who provided a ratings service for commercial broadcasting), the most lucrative business lay in the market and audience research fields. But the reputations of these men and of the new polling methods were established in the more publicly visible area of election-oriented polling. In this regard, as the article by Bill Maley testifies, the event most frequently cited as marking the triumph of modern scientific polling was the 1936 presidential election between the incumbent, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and his Republican rival, Alfred Landon. While the press and the most widely publicised traditional straw polls - that is, polls lacking any systematic statistical controls - predicted a Landon victory, the polls, such as Gallup's, which were based on a more representative sample, correctly foretold a win for Roosevelt. However, as Maley notes, the new polls considerably underestimated the extent of Roosevelt's landslide victory. Some reasons for this are discussed in our next reading, a comprehensive academic review of polling methods and election predictions written shortly after the 1936 campaign. The authors of this article address four main issues. First, they attempt to explain the existence of public opinion polls in terms of the functions they fulfil. Second, they distinguish a number of different types of polling method according to the sampling techniques used, the nature of the questions asked, whether interviewers are used or not and, if so, how they are recruited and trained. Third, they seek to identify the factors which may account for the various degrees of inaccuracy exhibited by different polling methods. Finally, they are concerned to identify some of the effects of opinion polling, particularly with regard to its implications for the democratic process.

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Read Daniel Katz and Hadley Cantril, 'Public opinion polls' (excerpts), reading 2. Attempt to answer the following study questions:

1. Identify the main <u>types</u> of reasons, in addition to those identified by Maley, which Katz and Cantril advance to account for the variance between poll predictions and election results.

2. What aspects of Katz and Cantril's arguments suggest that opinion polls might be more meaningfully regarded as particular <u>representations</u> of public opinion rather than as <u>reflections</u> of public opinion?

3. Katz and Cantril advance two different methods for assessing the accuracy of opinion polls. What are these, and what are their implications?

4. Note the respects in which Katz and Cantril's assessments of the effects of opinion polls accord such polls an active roll in opinion formation.

5. How would you characterise Katz and Cantril's views regarding the relationship between opinion polling and the democratic process?

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Comments

Katz and Cantril's attitude toward opinion polls is largely positive, but by no means uncritical. Apart from identifying a number of technical problems associated with opinion polling, their discussion raises a number of wider issues:

1. Compared with Maley, Katz and Cantril identify many more respects in which the organisation, design and administration of opinion polls may affect their results. The method of sampling used may thus influence the rate of return of questionnaires, and there is also the implicit bias of poll administrators to be taken into account as well as their natural tendency toward caution in interpreting the significance of the statistical tendencies exhibited by poll returns. Additionally, they suggest that the very structure of the interview situation may give a misleading impression of public opinion. Interviewees may answer as they feel they should, rather than giving their true opinion, particularly if the interviewer's independence and neutrality is regarded as suspect. This is supported by the perspectives on interviewing developed in the previous course. Finally, Katz and Cantril suggest that polling the views of individuals in isolation from their immediate social situation does not enable account to be taken of the more immediate agencies of opinion formation - the views of family and friends, for example - which ordinarily influence an individual's opinions.

2. Katz and Cantril draw particular attention to the representational aspects of opinion polling in their comments concerning the Yes/No alternatives of most opinion poll questionnaires. This means that public opinion is shaped up into and can only take the form of the simple oppositions produced by such representational categories as Yes/No, For/Against, etc. To put this another way, polls organise public opinion into the representational forms they use; in this way, they actually produce the distribution of opinions they claim to reflect. This is just as true of the more multi- option questions used in the Fortune poll. The differences between various polling methods should thus not be regarded as those between some methods which give a

distorted representation of public opinion and others which accurately reflect it. Rather, the differences are those between different ways of organising public opinion into, and by means of, different systems of representation.

3. The significance of this is made clear when Katz and Cantril argue that opinion polls can be tested by two means. First, the actual pattern of election results provides the acid test of the predictive capacity of such polls. However, predictive capacity, they argue, is not the same thing as accuracy. There are two reasons for this. First, a poll may give a relatively accurate indication of the state of public opinion and yet fail to predict the outcome of an election if it takes inadequate account of the specifically political mechanisms - especially the ways in which votes are counted - through which votes get translated into a particular political result. Thus the Fortune poll came nearest to assessing the degree of popular support for Roosevelt but performed poorly in its prediction of the election result. This is a familiar phenomenon in parliamentary democracies where, in Britain for example, the vote is not counted on a national but on a constituency-by-constituency basis. As a consequence, although Mrs. Thatcher's government was returned with a vastly increased parliamentary majority in 1983, the Conservative Party actually received a smaller share of the total national vote than it had in 1979.

We return to this point later. Meanwhile, Katz and Cantril argue that the second test of public opinion polls - and one which assesses their accuracy from a scientific perspective, rather than their short-term predictive capacity - can only be measured 'by subsequent surveys which sample more and more of the population' (R2:4). In other words, the test of one opinion poll is ... another opinion poll. This is a little like the infinite relay of language we discussed in the previous course. There, we argued, the language user, seeking the meaning of a particular word, is always passed on from one word to another: there is no way in which one can get off this conveyor belt of language to check the meaning of a word by a direct or unmediated contact with reality. Similarly, the test of the accuracy of an opinion poll, Katz and Cantril suggest, is another poll - that is, another form of the organisation and representation of public opinion. According to this conception, 'public opinion itself' emerges as an elusive quarry, since it can never be reached independently of different and particular forms of its representation.

4. In addition to the bandwagon effect discussed by Maley, Katz and Cantril argue that opinion polls may act as agencies of opinion formation in encouraging stereotyped thinking on political topics. The system of simple oppositions - Yes/No, For/Against, etc. - does not merely represent public opinion in a particular form; such representational forms may themselves actively contribute to the formation of political opinion in limiting the public

discussion of, and ways of thinking about, political issues to a constricted set of options.

5. Katz and Cantril view opinion polling as a welcome contribution to democratic political processes. It provides a means whereby public opinion may influence the behaviour of governments between elections and offers the possibility that public opinion itself may become more enlightened. In this sense, polls may help to realise the ideals of democracy: that policies should be determined via a process of open and rational debate between the members of a concerned citizenry. Against this, Katz and Cantril are sensitive to the charge that polls may merely make it easier for powerful interests to manipulate public opinion to their own advantage. The democratic potential of polling, they argue, will not be realised 'so long as there is no democratization in the ownership and operation of opinion-forming agencies' (R2:9).

We shall return to these more specifically political considerations later. For the moment, however, it is worth noting the respects in which, Katz and Cantril's criticisms notwithstanding, 1936 has come to represent a crucial moment in the history of public opinion. The 1936 results were invoked by Gallup, in particular, as unequivocally confirming the superiority of 'scientific' methods over both the skewed samples of the old straw polls and the even more tendentious versions of public opinion offered by the press and political interests. That the name Gallup became virtually synonymous with public opinion polling testifies to the zeal with which Dr Gallup promoted his activities both at home and abroad. Poll organisations affiliated with Gallup were set up in Britain and France in the late thirties, then in Australia, Canada and, after the war, a number of other countries. By 1972 Gallup could boast of an impressive international network: 'some 10,000 interviewers, representing 26 polling organisations ... conducting public opinion surveys in more than 50 nations'.

The diffusion of polling techniques and their utilisation by parties and other political agencies has not occurred automatically or uniformly, however. The polls soon outlived the early accusation that they were merely a fad which would disappear once its novelty value was exhausted. But other resistances and lines of critique have proved more durable.

1. Katz and Cantril indicate that the polls had scarcely appeared before there were Congressional proposals 'to bar ballots from the United States mails' (R2:9). Allegations that polls constitute an illegitimate intrusion into the political process, that they actually influence what they purport to measure, have recurred throughout the history of opinion polls. In some countries, e.g. France, the publication of poll results is banned during the final week of an election campaign. Charges of this sort are generally based on a supposed 'bandwagon effect' induced by the publicising of poll results.

2. Academic critics were quick to attack the polls, although the grounds on which they did so varied considerably. Attitude researchers tended to regard the commercial polling methods as crude and simplistic and advocated the use of multiple question scales rather than the single 'agree/disagree' questions that were more characteristic of the syndicated polls. Others were critical of the conception of public opinion implicit in polling procedures, maintaining that this was a theoretically inadequate and politically dangerous misrepresentation of how public opinion really functions. In a book-length critique a political scientist, Lindsay Rogers, disputed Gallup's claim to have provided a means for charting the mood of the people. Instead of registering public opinion, Rogers alleged, the polls merely summate 'the affirmative and negative replies that persons give when interviewers whom they have never met before ask them questions they have not anticipated, on subjects that may not interest them' (1977, p.22).

3. The early pollsters used elections as showcases to demonstrate their wares. But pinning the reputation of polling to the prediction of election outcomes turned out to be a hazardous business. In the 1948 presidential election all the polls favoured the Republican candidate, Thomas Dewey, so strongly that the Democrat contender, Harry Truman, made what he called 'those Republican polls' a campaign issue. Gallup responded by claiming that 'next Tuesday the whole world will be able to see down to the last percentage point how good we are' (Wheeler, 1977, pp.89-90). Truman won, to the chagrin of the pollsters and the delight of their critics. The pollsters subsequently amended their sampling procedures and tempered their claims regarding the election-oriented polls: it was now said that such polls should be considered as 'snapshots' of the states-of-voting intention during a campaign, not as a prediction of the final result. Despite this disclaimer, whenever there is a significant discrepancy between poll findings and election outcomes, a new round of poll criticism is triggered off. This happened in the Australian federal election of 1980 when most final polls showed a clear ALP lead, but the Fraser-led coalition survived with a 23 seat majority.

4. By the 1960 presidential election, polling was becoming fully integrated into American political campaigning. John F. Kennedy spent some $400,000 on polls during his successful bid for the presidency, while his Republican rival Richard Nixon was assisted by the equally extensive - if less publicised - polling furnished by Claude Robinson. Elsewhere political polls developed more slowly and unevenly. For example, by the late 1950s the Conservative Party in Britain was utilising data both from the newspaper-published polls and from privately commissioned surveys, while the Labour Party either neglected or was actively hostile towards surveyderived information. The period saw the creation of an apparatus within the Conservative Party which co-ordinated campaign related

activities, allocated a very considerable advertising budget, digested the poll findings produced by the party's advertising agency and by other private and published surveys, and formulated campaign propaganda on the basis of such findings. These developments were supported by the activities of business interests sympathetic to the Conservatives. These spent approximately one and a half million pounds on political advertising, much of it guided and checked by opinion poll research.

By contrast, the Labour Party had neither an interest in opinion polls nor the capacity to utilise their findings. There was no central organisational machinery equivalent to that of the Conservatives. Nor was there anything like the same level of financial support. More crucially, Labour politics involved conceptions of political practice and election campaigning that had no place for devices like polls. To those for whom campaigns meant polemical pamphleteering, political oratory and face-to-face contact with constituents, the opinion poll was an alien and impersonal instrument. Further, the polls were regarded as ideologically suspect because of their identification with commercial marketing and with the Conservative press (neither of the two dailies that supported Labour ran opinion polls; all the main anti-Labour dailies did). From a traditional Labour perspective the polls, in soliciting the opinions of individuals, seemed to be aligned with all the forces which denied a class basis to politics in general, and which seemed destined to erode the working-class basis of Labour politics in particular.

Polling, then, has encountered criticism, scepticism and resistance on various points. Its proponents have responded by appealing to the legitimacy of scientific principles and procedures, and by accusing critics of misunderstanding or ignoring the statistical fine print. When subjected to more methodologically sophisticated critiques pollsters have laid claim to other virtues. For example, replying to a very detailed examination of polling methods, an academic defender of opinion polls accused the critic of

> appearing to excommunicate a whole new area of modern statistical development which is concerned with the fashioning of relatively imprecise statistics which are, however, of remarkable efficiency in terms of information obtainable per unit cost in time and money. (Crespi, 1946, p.567)

While the point quoted might not have satisfied the purist statistician, it has provided the pollster's sales pitch to prospective clients: the survey method, it is claimed, can produce relatively cheaply and quickly information that is practical, usable, and relevant to the client's concerns.

For more public consumption polling has been justified in rather different terms. Polls, it is often argued, are

an inherently democratic instrument since they pay attention not to the most powerful vocal or visible elements of political life but to the opinions of ordinary people. The polling of the opinions and attitudes of the populace is thus said to guarantee and extend the sovereignty of the consumer in the market place and of the ordinary citizen in the political domain. Again, it will prove worthwhile to explore these issues in relation to the early history of public opinion polls in the U.S.A.

2.4 The will of the people

In *Polls: Their Use and Misuse in Politics*, Roll Jnr. and Cantril state that

> It should come as no surprise that the polling technique has caught on in American politics. It is a logical extension of our political tradition. Not only are we told ours is a 'government of the people, by the people, and for the people', but one of the basic trends in the evolution of our constitutional system has been the expansion of opportunities for public participation in the political process. (1972, p.5-6)

And recall a passage in the Katz and Cantril reading:

> The conservative press has been aware of these democratic possibilities of the polls and has consequently opposed them. In the wake of the last election a flood of anti-poll editorials appeared, condemning them as public nuisances ... If the people become vocal the newspapers will no longer be able to tell them what to think. And most editors, representing as they do the *status quo*, are afraid that people will become aware of their political power. (R2:9)

Katz and Cantril's contention that polls 'represent an increase in democracy' was given fuller expression in the first major manifesto on behalf of opinion polls, *The Pulse of Democracy* by George Gallup and Saul Rae (1940).

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Read George Gallup and Saul Rae, 'The voices of the people' (excerpts), reading 3.

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SAQ 2

1. Summarise the criticisms Gallup and Rae advance regarding the reliability of elections, the press, etc., as indices of public opinion.

2. Summarise the case they advance for polling as a more reliable index of public opinion.

Comments

1. We might first note the rhetorical strategy which Gallup and Rae deploy. They present their arguments concerning the limitations of elections and the like and develop their case for opinion polls not directly but by glossing the views of James Bryce, a noted American theorist of democracy. In this way, their presentation establishes a strong connection in the reader's mind between polling and the democratic tradition. This tendentiously biases the reader in favour of opinion polling. Opinion polls, it is suggested, are merely a natural extension of the democratic process, and not some alien, new-fangled device which intrudes upon it. They are the means for truly registering public opinion which Bryce suggested, but which he could not envisage in their modern, developed, systematic form. As a consequence, opinion polls are presented as an integral part of the American tradition of democratic theory.

2. All the same, this rhetorical strategy does not entirely succeed in masking an evident contradiction in Gallup and Rae's argument. With regard to all of the other forms in which public opinion might be manifested, Gallup and Rae argue that the forms in which that opinion is represented may, in representing it, also distort it. As they put it, Bryce 'knew that the multitude of voices claiming to speak for the people might prevent the people themselves from being heard' (R3:1). By contrast, opinion polls are said to constitute a mechanism for registering public opinion which lacks this crucial defect. They are the form in which public opinion directly manifests itself without being subject to the distortion of any mediating system of representation; they 'let the people speak for themselves' and 'substitute direct factual reporting for intuition as a guide to public opinion' (R3:7). The basis for this argument is an interesting echo of the ideology of interviewing discussed in the previous course: that is, the view of interviewing as merely an extension of normal conversation (or, in Bryce's terms, 'talk') and, as such, a mechanism without effects. In this way, whereas all other mechanisms for gauging and representing public opinion have distorting effects, the only effect attributed to polling is that of enabling public opinion to emerge and express itself directly and without interference. Public opinion polls are

merely a mechanism for bringing public opinion into the open 'for all to see'.

3. Gallup and Rae do not advance a theory of public opinion but reserve this for a later date. A theory of public opinion, they argue, can be developed only when the facts of public opinion are more fully known. However, Gallup and Rae do subscribe to Bryce's definition of public opinion which has some interesting consequences:

> It [public opinion] is confused, incoherent, amorphous, varying from day to day and week to week. But in the midst of this diversity and confusion every question as it arises into importance is subjected to a process of consolidation and clarification until there emerge and take shape certain views or sets of interconnected views, each held and advocated in common by bodies of citizens. It is to the power exerted by any such views or sets of views, when held by an apparent majority of citizens, that we refer when we talk of Public Opinion as approving or disapproving a certain doctrine or proposal, and thereby becoming a guiding or ruling power. (R3:1)

According to Gallup and Rae, public opinion is nothing but the aggregate of the opinions of individuals on specified topics. Bryce, however, sees public opinion as something which develops and takes shape in a process of exchange between citizens and which assumes a political significance only when represented in a particular way so it appears that a majority of citizens hold a certain set of views. It is also clear that public opinion, for Bryce, concerns the views of citizens - that is, only those with specified political rights and duties - rather than just everyone.

4. We shall return to these issues later when we consider the history of the concept of public opinion. Meanwhile, having noted the general aspects of Gallup and Rae's discussion, let us record some points of agreement and disagreement with their analysis.

(a) In one sense Gallup and Rae are quite right to say that elections are not mirrors which reflect the 'true' distribution of public opinion. The reason is that elections aggregate votes, not opinions, beliefs, desires and so on. Firstly, electors may vote along the same lines but for diverse, even divergent, reasons. Secondly, electoral outcomes depend to an important extent on the number and types of options available to voters (how many candidates/parties are engaged in the contest) as well as on how the differences between these options are presented and perceived. For example, the landslide victory of the Conservative Party, led by Margaret Thatcher, in the 1983 British general election has been interpreted in terms of an upsurge of popular support for 'Thatcherism' in the wake of the Falklands

war. In fact, as we have noted, the Conservatives picked up less of the popular vote than they received in 1979 when they won with a much smaller majority of seats, and only half a per cent more than they got in 1966 when Labour won with a majority of 96 seats. The difference in 1983 was due to a split in the now (possibly anti-) Tory vote consequent on the emergence of a new electoral force, the Liberal Party-Social Democratic Party alliance, as an option distinct from the Conservative-Labour dichotomy. Thirdly, electoral outcomes are also an effect of the ways in which electoral systems aggregate votes. That is, the same distribution of votes may lead to different outcomes depending

1. on how electoral boundaries are drawn - a point that should be familiar enough to you, given the debates over the implications of the Queensland zone system; and

2. on whether electoral success is determined by a 'first past the post' principle (as in Britain), or by the preferential voting system with which we are most familiar (as in most state elections and the House of Representatives), or by proportional representation (as practised in the Senate and Tasmanian state elections), or by some other system.

Because of the operation of these specifically political factors, the votes of the same Australian electorate in 1983 produced a substantial majority for the Labor Party in the House of Representatives but not in the Senate, and a significant Democratic representation in the Senate but none at all in the House of Representatives.

(b) Although we have agreed with Gallup and Rae that elections do not faithfully mirror public opinion, we must now qualify our agreement and question the terms of their argument. We do so on two grounds:

1. Gallup and Rae maintain that a number of factors intervene between, on the one hand, the 'real distribution and concerns of public opinion, and on the other hand, election results, such that the latter reflect the former only in some partial or distorted fashion. Elections are thus an imperfect device for registering the popular will' (p.00). On the contrary, we would argue that 'popular will' or 'the people's verdict' is not something that elections reflect, well or badly; it is something that elections make possible. An election is precisely a device designed to produce a result (i.e., a winning candidate or a parliamentary majority) which can then count as 'the verdict of the people' irrespective of whether the winning majority is huge or small, and irrespective of

whatever motives underlie the casting of votes. It is not possible to argue that the people's will is somehow always already there, just waiting to find its unmediated expression through the process of voting. The electoral system, party politics and so on influence and construct a result, which is only created and made visible by this process. The great variety of beliefs, attitudes and opinions become synthesised as 'for' or 'against', as Labor Party or as Liberal Party votes as an effect of this process. It is, therefore, not meaningful to interpret election results as either accurate or distorted reflections of public opinion. As we have argued earlier, the reason for this is simply that there is no pure or neutral form in which public opinion can be manifested which is not in some way influenced by the mechanisms through which that opinion is organised and represented. To reiterate then: by producing a formal outcome, elections make possible a result that can be represented as the people's 'choice', 'verdict', 'will', etc.; but elections do not reflect or ratify a verdict which has somehow already taken shape prior to electoral processes and outside electoral politics.

2. Rather similar points can be made about opinion polls. Indeed, polls conform closely to a voting model. What polls count as 'opinions' are more like votes than the sorts of opinions we would normally encounter in everyday life. Elections provide a means of converting diverse opinions, allegiances, preferences and antipathies into a standardised form (the vote), which can then be aggregated to produce a result. Polls also convert heterogeneous beliefs and prejudices, different types of knowledge and ignorance, into a common or homogeneous form such that responses can be aggregated to produce a result - a distribution of 'public opinion'. For example, confronted with an opinion poll question a respondent might (a) deliver an elaborate and informed disquisition on the subject, canvassing the merits and weaknesses of the various options but without choosing between them; (b) denounce the options presented as ideologically loaded and deliver an alternative characterisation of the problem; (c) express an interest in the issue but defer a judgement until the matter has been given more thought; (d) confess complete ignorance of the issue and a total lack of interest in it. Now these diverse 'opinions' would usually be recorded as 'no opinion', a sort of invalid vote. This is a deliberately extreme example. Polls, and particularly more complex academic surveys, can allow finer discriminations, but the point remains that for 'opinions' to be aggregated/measured they must first be reduced to a

standardised form. Polls take no more account of the beliefs or arguments that might be supposed to underlie the 'opinions' they record than elections do of the opinions or motives behind the votes that they record.

To summarise, then, we have argued, in response to Gallup and Rae:

1. that some of the factors which, according to Gallup and Rae, limit the value of elections as indices of opinion apply equally to opinion polls; but also

2. that these factors far from being negative, limiting or distorting, are the very means that enable elections and polls to serve at all as indices of opinion; and, by implication

3. that figurative talk of polls 'reflecting' and 'mirroring' public opinion, or of polls as a 'channel for the expression of public opinion' is quite misleading. Polls are neither a mirror nor a neutral medium through which public opinion passes and becomes visible. They produce a 'picture' of public opinion and the type of picture that results depends on the particular means employed to draw it. Or, to put it a little differently: if polls enable the public to speak they do so by (a) creating a special speech situation, (b) delimiting who can speak (individuals not groups or organisations) and (c) prescribing the topics for speech, the vocabulary to be used and the types of statement that can be made.

2.5 The press and the 'platform'

We must now deal with the two 'organs of public opinion' which Gallup and Rae, taking their lead from Lord Bryce, consider in the latter part of the reading: first, the miscellaneous category of public meetings, petitions, delegations, political campaigns, etc. which we can subsume under the heading of a nineteenth-century term, 'the platform', and, second, the press. In both cases, as with elections, Gallup and Rae first pay homage to the value of these organs or sources of opinion, and then qualify that value almost out of existence. The press and the platform are at once essential and treacherous as indices of opinion

1. the press, 'because newspapers mold, as well as reflect, public opinion, and because their influence is often exerted in quite opposite and contradictory directions ...' (R3:4);

2. the platform, because letters, petitions, meetings and so on always express less than the full array of opinion and because, in an age in which propaganda has become a science, these means of expression are open to

skilful manipulators who can 'build a private interest into a public demonstration' (R3:4).

Somewhat different views are advanced in the next two readings. The first, an article on public opinion which first appeared in one of the early issues of the *American Journal of Sociology*, surveys the development of 'the platform' in Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Written prior to the appearance of public opinion polls, our reasons for including it here are:

1. It provides a different estimation of the value of 'the platform' as a means for expressing public opinion from that of Gallup and Rae, yet it is written from within the liberal-democratic tradition to which Gallup and Rae claim to be the heirs.

2. It offers us a means of opening up another problem: that of the history of the term 'public opinion' and some of its contrasting meanings and uses.

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Read Walter Shepard, 'Public opinion' (excerpts), reading 4.

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SAQ 3

Summarise the way in which Shepard's view of 'the platform' differs from that of Gallup and Rae.

Shepard's account is particularly reliant upon nineteenth-century liberal conceptions of public opinion, especially those of Henry Jephson. Free discussion about public issues, whether informal conversation or formal public speech or debate, was the hallmark of such conceptions of public opinion. If such discussion was reasoned, and unhindered by censorship or other constraints, then the benefits of general enlightenment and good government, it was held, would follow automatically. This view of public opinion ran counter to the conservative imagery of the people as a barbaric mass or revolutionary mob. Jephson comments (in a passage not included in the Shepard piece):

> It was a hopeful sign and not, as so many Tory statesmen imagined, an alarming sign, once the great toiling masses, hitherto dumb and not willing now able to speak, began to find their voice through the platform, and to appeal to the legislature and to the public for redress, instead of taking the remedy into their own hands. (Jephson in Smith, 1976, p.33)

In the liberal view, what the conservatives failed to realise was that the platform provided a means of integrating 'the toiling masses' into civilised society, that it was a means of preserving the political order rather than of destroying it.

The middle class reformers claimed that the platform and the 'free' press would enable the common people to speak to their rulers. But they were also quite explicit in arguing that such devices allowed the masses to be spoken to, that is, to be politically educated and instructed by their betters. As one opponent of stamp duties on the press ('those taxes on knowledge') put it, 'The larger we open the field of general instruction, the firmer the foundations on which order, the loyalty and good conduct of the lower classes will rest.' The organs of opinion, on which such instruction depended, were to be instruments for domesticating political discontents, or at least to be instruments for the promotion of respectable working-class aspirations at the expense of insurrectionary and 'Jacobin' tendencies. If the toiling masses could not be incorporated into 'the public', reformers argued, they would resort to other and more drastic modes of expression - rick-burning, machine-smashing, riotous demonstrations and strikes. Thus, Shepard and Jephson counterpose free speech and its organs, the public platform and the uncensored press, to coercive and autocratic modes of social control. However, the two can be seen as alternative strategies for combating and containing a foe common to Whig and Tory alike - the illegal but popular radical working-class press and its 'pernicious doctrines' of class organisation and struggle.

Something of the distinctiveness of Gallup and Rae's position and of the definitional shifts which accompanied the rise of opinion polls is discernible in the contrast between Gallup and Rae's conception of public opinion and that of nineteenth-century liberals as epitomised by Jephson. It is a striking and paradoxical contrast. On the one hand Gallup and Rae claim that the opinion poll is continuous with classical conceptions of liberal democracy, and that it extends them by implementing a mechanism that lets 'the people speak for themselves'. On the other hand, when Gallup and Rae scrutinise the various organs which, for nineteenth-century liberals, were co-extensive with public opinion - elections, the free press and so forth - all are found to be wanting as guides to public opinion, and for much the same reason. All combine, and confuse, the influencing of opinion and the reflecting of it. Prior to polling, the dominant characterisation of public opinion identified it with active participation in political processes, the promotion of ideas through campaigning, petitioning, debating, and, for better or worse, 'the public' applied only to those engaged in such activities. Gallup and Rae neatly reverse this conception. Those most active in political affairs are the least reliable indicators of opinion because their aims and interests are necessarily partial, and because their very involvement in a

political activity makes them unrepresentative of those not so involved.

Thus the most publicly visible opinion is also the most treacherous index of 'real public opinion', and 'real public opinion' does not appear in the public arena at all but has to be elicited from individuals by means of special questions chosen and asked by others. In the nineteenth-century version, public opinion was a term that applied more to the process by which a judgement was reached than to the judgement itself. The modern definition of public opinion as a statistical distribution of individual opinions reverses this emphasis. Public opinion no longer refers to the opinions of a collectivity (= public), arrived at through an open and public process of discussion. Rather, it refers to the privately-held opinions of individuals which are made public - in the sense of being made more widely known - by the activities of pollsters.

The difference can be seen clearly in the passage in which Gallup and Rae argue that polling implements Bryce's suggestion regarding how to 'discover' public opinion (R3:6). By a rather sleight-of-hand manoeuvre, Gallup and Rae equate Bryce's 'talk' with the poll interview situation. 'Talk' as 'the best way of reaching the truth' clearly implies the process of elucidation and clarification through discussion which nineteenth-century liberals saw as the essential characteristic of public opinion. But the poll interview is neither a situation in which that sort of discussion takes place, nor is it a situation in which interviewers 'listen to voters expressing their attitudes in ordinary conversation'. The interview is precisely an interview - questions and answers. Interviewers are, in fact, instructed not to engage in discussion or debate with interviewees and to discourage interviewees from discussing their responses with any other persons present. The poll interview elicits answers, called opinions, from its subjects as if these opinions already existed and were separable from the context of the immediate interview situation. Clearly, in the light of the perspectives developed in Course HP06a, *Language and Society*, both assumptions are contestable.

Although Gallup and Rae on the one hand, and Shepard on the other thus define public opinion differently and offer different assessments of the value of the platform as a means for expressing public opinion, their accounts nonetheless share one important feature. Both conceive of the history of public opinion as a continuously unfolding process through which public opinion is expressed by means of devices which are progressively more adequate to the task. Both assume a pre-existing public opinion which is made known more directly by the development of the appropriate mechanisms - 'the platform' for Shepard, public opinion polls for Gallup and Rae. In this sense, the ideal presupposed by both accounts is a situation in which public opinion can express itself and make itself known directly,

without mediation of any kind. In our comments so far, we have sought to question this view by stressing the degree to which any mechanism for making public opinion known simultaneously organises and represents such opinion in particular ways.

Let us now turn to a second aspect of Gallup and Rae's account - their views of the press and of the relations between opinion polls and the press. Our next reading is an informative account of the relations between polls and the press written by an insider (Crespi spent 20 years working for the Gallup organisation). It does not compare polls and the press as measures of public opinion but it does have a direct bearing on the main themes of this section. More particularly, the reading

1. supplements and illustrates our earlier comments regarding the historical interdependence of opinion polls and the press;

2. argues that the polls are shaped in crucial ways by their connections with news media agencies;

3. suggests an account of opinion polls that contrasts sharply with that of Gallup and Rae.

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Read Irving Crespi, 'Polls as journalism' (excerpts), reading 5, and attempt to answer the following study questions:

1. Summarise the respects in which journalistic practices and values affect the practices and policies of opinion poll organisations.

2. Define the concept of 'feedback loop' and summarise the ways in which this operates in the relations between public opinion polls, the news and the political process.

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It is arguable that the most important contemporary 'form' of public opinion appears as a combination of two elements: (a) the results of an opinion poll, (b) published as a news item. At one point in their book, Gallup and Rae say that polls 'command interest because they articulate what the mass of the common people thinks about the headline issues of everyday life' (our emphasis). Polls thus start off from the news and end up as the news. Crespi's paper presents a similar if more elaborate version of the relation between polls and news. He suggests that journalistic conceptions of news values (newsworthiness), news deadlines and modes of reporting have important effects on the choice of opinion poll topics, on the framing of questions, on the timing of polls, and on the ways in which

poll results are presented to the public. We will follow up two of these points.

1. News values and agenda setting

Producing news for whatever medium involves selection, hence both the differentiation of 'newsworthy' issues from those that are seen as having little news value, and the ordering of the newsworthy items into a hierarchy of importance. The selection procedures are governed by diverse and complex factors and rarely, if at all, by explicit formal criteria (journalists often claim that news events somehow 'select themselves' or are 'sniffed out' by the newsman's trusty nose). However it is done, this selecting and ordering process separates out some of the innumerable sayings, doings and happenings of the world and renders these 'visible' as public events. This set of newsworthy events, issues and opinions then constitutes a focus for comment and discussion. Media scholars have called this process 'the agenda-setting function of the press'. They suggest that 'the news media may not tell us what to think, but they do tell us what to think about'. Since political disputes often involve competing 'agendas' - that is, competing conceptions of which issues should be priorities for policy and public consideration - the media clearly exert considerable political influence through their agenda-setting function.

Crespi's most important argument is that, for various quite practical reasons, the 'agenda' of poll issues is closely tied to that of the news media. An obvious benefit flows from gearing poll topics to the 'headline issues' of the news agenda. More people are likely to have heard of the issue and are thus more likely to respond, if asked, with what the polls call an 'opinion'. But it also means that poll issues are determined to an important extent by issues considered newsworthy; that is, by the practices of the media. One could plausibly speculate, for instance, that over the years polls have asked many more questions concerning strikes and unions (often tying the two together) than they have concerning the managerial policies of large companies, their investment strategies and industrial relations practices, industrial health and safety records and the like. The economic and social consequences of these latter are of enormous importance but they are less visible in terms of immediate effects, less dramatic and less newsworthy than a picket line or an absence of trains.

2. Polls as news

Crespi finds virtue in the journalistic requirements that place a high value on factual documentation of poll results, but faults poll reportage for its paucity of analysis and interpretation. The media, in effect, make a distinction between survey results, as the objective facts about public opinion (news), and interpretation, as subjective opinion about the facts of public opinion

(comment). But the reporting of polled opinion goes beyond the simple reprinting of poll results in at least two respects. Firstly, media reports of poll results and discussions about their significance frequently omit crucial methodological details which would be required for any rational assessment of their meaning. Secondly, and relatedly, the translation of poll results into the idiom of news speech ('journalese'), particularly in headlines, frequently has the effect of transforming the tentative conclusions of pollsters into unqualified statements of fact. Or headlines may convert a majority into an implied unanimity, as in a classic *Courier-Mail* headline published during the 1977 state election: 'Queenslanders Agree With Ban on Street Marches', when the poll result indicated that, of the Queensland sample, 49 per cent favoured the ban and 46 per cent opposed it, and of the national sample 49 per cent were opposed and 45 per cent in favour.

We can now contrast Crespi's account of opinion polls with that of Gallup and Rae. Whereas the latter speak of the polls 'expressing', 'articulating', 'giving a voice' to the mass of the common people, Crespi emphasises how polling is primarily responsive to the institutional imperatives of journalism. Rather than emanating from 'the people', polled opinion circulates in the context of 'a feedback loop', in which (1) definitions of what is news (2) determine the content of polling, which (3) affects the political process, (4) which then becomes news. While, for Crespi, polls remain valuable sources of information, they hardly constitute the privileged mirror of the public mind that they are in Gallup and Rae's more extravagant moments. The difference is that Gallup and Rae portray the polls as a sort of pure measurement instrument outside social and political life, whereas for Crespi the polling apparatus is locked into, and affected by, relations with other institutional complexes (the media, politics).

2.6 Summary and review

Our primary purpose in this part of the course has been to produce a series of problems and questions in relation to the concept of public opinion. We have done so by reviewing accounts of the nature and history of public opinion polls, particularly those advanced by pollsters themselves, and have shown how these might be questioned and how such questioning in turn gives rise to a series of broader problems. It may help now to identify these problems in the order in which they will be discussed in the remainder of the study guide.

1. First, we have seen that the term 'public opinion' is surrounded by considerable problems of definition. We turn to these in the next section - not, to remind you of the arguments advanced in section 1.3, to propose a definition of our own but to consider a range of definitions and their effects. We have also seen that

the concept of public opinion implied and produced by polling techniques is of quite recent innovation. To place this concept in historical perspective, we shall review a number of earlier concepts of public opinion, the nature of the public/private distinction on which they rested and their place in relation to the emergence of the 'public sphere' (section 3).

2. We have shown, in our comments on Shepard's 'Public Opinion', that political theorists of different persuasions have reacted differently to the incorporation of public opinion into the political process. We shall explore these issues further by considering the different ways in which liberal-democratic theorists, mass society theorists and Marxists have reacted to these developments (section 4).

3. Finally, we have argued that opinion polls do not reflect or measure public opinion so much as organise and represent it in particular forms. In this respect, we have contended, they function as agencies of opinion formation which must be examined in the light of the institutional relations which link them with other agencies of opinion formation - the press, for example. We shall develop this argument further by considering the relations between opinion polling and other agencies of opinion formation (newspapers, television) with respect to public perceptions of crime (section 4).

3 PUBLIC OPINION: DEFINITIONS AND DEBATES

3.1 What's in a word?

The definitions of public opinion that have been advanced in the literature on the subject are somewhat bewildering in their number and variety. So much so that some writers have concluded that 'public opinion' has become so overloaded and ambiguous a term that it has no conceptual value at all. More usually, though, discussions begin by noting the diversity of definitions and usages and then proceed to reduce this multiplicity to a more singular meaning. Some versions are discarded because they no longer apply to contemporary realities or because they are not susceptible to empirical investigation. Or a common denominator, as the essential meaning and underlying the apparent diversity is found. Or the analyst simply settles on the definition that is most convenient to the task at hand.

In this course we will be in no hurry to pare down the various connotations of 'public opinion' to a single interpretation or an all-inclusive definition. Rather than dissolving the differences we propose to examine them and their consequences. For differences of definition and usage are not, as the saying goes, 'matters of merely academic interest'. There is no simple division between the 'reality' of public opinion, on the one hand, and specialist disputes over how to define, analyse and measure that reality on the other. Struggles over and for the political control and direction of public opinion frequently involve disputes over what counts as public opinion. Competing claims over what counts as 'real evidence for' or a 'genuine expression of' public opinion involve differing versions of what public opinion is or should be, and these, in turn may have marked political consequences. In short, disputes on definition are hardly external to the realm of political debate and thereby, of course, to the process of public opinion formation itself. It will not be possible, throughout our discussion, to locate a definition of public opinion which is not (a) informed by particular political conceptions and concerns, and (b) pregnant with political implications.

We have asked, in our title for this section: 'What's in a word?' (or, more accurately in this case, two words: 'public opinion'). Our answer, in view of the arguments advanced in the previous course, is: nothing. That is, there is nothing in a word in the sense that its meaning derives not from its intrinsic properties but from its relations to other words. In order to review contrasting definitions of the term 'public opinion', therefore, we need to examine three sets of relations. First, we need to examine the ways in which each part of this composite term functions in relation to the range of possible terms with which it may be contrasted. We need, that is to say, to consider first the ways in which the meaning of 'opinion'

may vary according to whether it is contrasted with 'attitudes', 'beliefs' or 'knowledge'. Second, we need to consider the functioning of 'public' in relation to its implied opposite, 'private', and its range of associated meanings - 'secret' and 'individual', for example. Finally, we need to consider the different ways in which 'public' and 'opinion' may be combined into a composite term and the range of related composite terms from which 'public opinion' may be distinguished: 'popular belief', say.

In sum, we cannot discover what 'public opinion' means without simultaneously investigating what it does not mean. As we saw in the preceding course, meaning is relational - what a word or phrase means is defined only in relation to what it does not mean. The reason 'public opinion' is such a knotty term definitionally is because it constitutes an intersection of a complex network of interacting contrasting meanings: opinion is like, but not quite the same as, attitude, public is the opposite of private, and so on. Although we shall examine these contrasts sequentially, it should be borne in mind that they cannot be neatly separated from one another. It should also be borne in mind that our concern is not to come up with correct definitions but to examine the functioning of these terms within differently organised fields of meaning.

3.2 Opinions/attitudes

In the 1920s and 1930s, alongside the development of opinion poll organisations, a new wave of social scientists set out to empirically analyse and measure opinion. This involved a reconceptualisation of the hitherto prevailing meanings of the term 'opinion', particularly with regard to the need to develop techniques for measuring opinion. On the one hand, researchers in this developing area of social psychology wanted to claim scientific status for their endeavours. The view of science to which this community of scholars subscribed can be briefly summarised as follows:

> Phenomena are explained scientifically when their uniformities can be determined mathematically. Then prediction is possible. Accurate observation, if it does not result in mathematically supported predictions is, therefore, merely a preliminary to scientific explanation proper.

Empirical observation, however scrupulous, was thus not enough to earn the status of science; only exhaustive statistical analysis would suffice for this. On the other hand, the phenomena with which these researchers were concerned - the miscellany of attitudes, opinions, preferences, traits, dispositions, sentiments, emotions, beliefs, biases, prejudices and so on - were not immediately amenable to such treatment. In the late 1920s, L.L. Thurstone devised a scaling technique which resolved many of these statistical problems and which he announced in a

famous article entitled 'Attitudes Can Be Measured'. This launched a new career for the concept 'attitude' as a measurable object but, in doing so, it implied a new definition of 'opinion', as our next reading shows.

In 'Attitude: the history of a concept' (reading 6) Donald Fleming provides a particularly rich account of the transformations of 'attitude' as it was used in different periods by different disciplines. We won't attempt to summarise this complex itinerary, but a couple of points are necessary to preface the reading.

1. In the eighteenth century, 'attitude' signified 'any posture of the living body recognisably adapted to a course of action or expressing a mental state'. The emphasis is on the body 'striking an attitude', a calculated pose such as that of an actor in the theatre. In the nineteenth century, this element of contrivance or artificiality disappeared (although 'don't attitudinise' still carries the negative connotation of putting on a pose or posturing) and attitudes came to be regarded as a normal rather than an exceptional component of human behaviour. What remained, though, and in areas of research that are otherwise very different, was the connection between mental states (whether intellectual or emotional) and physical or physiological states. Attitude seen as a disposition towards something, as an 'incipient action', entailed some anticipatory orientation of the body if only in the form of subtle almost subliminal motor adjustments (e.g. the tensing of particular muscles).

2. In various ways, during the first decades of the twentieth century, 'attitude' was divested of this physical dimension. Fleming focusses on the work of the Chicago sociologist, W.I. Thomas, a key figure in the development of American social psychology. Thomas conceived of attitude as a simultaneous mobilisation of the cognitive and emotional faculties in a 'tendency to action', but a tendency which no longer required any physiological priming of the organism for activity. This shift to a purely psychological conception of attitude, however, posed new problems. Since physiology had earlier provided the means whereby psychology had associated itself with the more legitimate sciences, to sever the connection was both to threaten the scientific respectability of such psychological research and to render the new concept of 'attitude' vulnerable to charges of prescientific 'mentalism'. Hence, argues Fleming, the importance of Thurstone who showed that a strictly psychological conception of attitude could not only be measured, but that it could be measured more precisely than could many of the pseudo-physiological factors with which attitude had previously been associated.

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Read Donald Fleming: 'Attitude: the history of a concept' (excerpts), reading 6, paying particular regard to the following study questions:

1. How did 'attitudes' come to be redefined?

2. How did 'opinion' come to be redefined?

3. How were these two semantic shifts related to one another?

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Comments

Perhaps the most important point to note is the respects in which 'attitude' and 'opinion' came to be redefined in relation to one another. 'Attitude', that is to say, acquired a new set of associations because it was distinguished from 'opinion', and vice versa. More particularly, 'attitude' has taken on a new meaning, referring to a deeper level of personality, as invisible, behind speech but motivating it; this is produced as a consequence of the limitation of 'opinion' to those facets of personal reality which are visible on the surface of social life. The distinction opinion/attitude both produces and is dependent on a series of related oppositions - surface/depth; open/hidden; rational/irrational - which was not true of earlier uses of these terms. This shift, Fleming suggests, was associated with the emergence of new disciplines, particularly psychology, and the new systems of intelligibility they proposed for thinking about the organisation of human personality.

Of course, opinion/attitude is not the only significant contrast to be examined to determine the range of possible meanings attributable to the former. Opinion/belief and opinion/sentiment would also be relevant oppositions. However, our discussion of the opinion/attitude contrast will suffice to exemplify the general issues we are concerned with. Let us now move on to another contrast: public/private.

3.3 Public/private

Obviously there is no single general demarcation between public and private that operates across all areas of social practice. Ownership and property rights, for example, involve a variety of public/private distinctions. Thus public enterprises are differentiated from private enterprise on the grounds that the former are publicly owned (i.e., by the state) and the latter are not. The public and the private can be represented as antagonistic or mutually exclusive, for example, when journalists invoke 'the

public's right to know' while their subject or victim appeals to 'rights to privacy'; or when the 'public interest' (i.e., the common good) is counterposed to 'private interests'. Private and public operate variously to differentiate particular places or spaces, modes of dress, forms of appropriate speech and behaviour. In some (e.g. legal) contexts they are given very precise and particular interpretations; in others they simply function as diffuse indicators of a difference between the collective/social and the personal/individual.

To reiterate, then, public opinion can mean any and all of the following:

1. the opinion of a public rather than of a private individual, or of a collection of individuals, or of a majority of individuals;

2. at the level of the individual, a person's public opinion as opposed to his or her private opinion; or, what one says in public as compared with what one says in private (or even what one thinks and doesn't say at all);

3. opinions that have some public circulation or visibility, rather than those that remain within a private sphere, however that is defined;

4. opinions about public matters rather than exclusively private or personal concerns. This might mean either opinions about matters that have been made public, or opinions about issues that can be regarded as affecting all members of a public or a community.

There is certainly ample room for confusion and ambiguity here. But, at the same time, 'public opinion' survives as a term, or an image, not because it has any precise conceptual value or 'names' some evident reality, but precisely because it taps into a whole network of associated categories and connotations, figures of speech, and conventional distinctions. The diverse connotations of public opinion can deprive it of one true meaning while enabling it to be widely used as a plausible figure of speech; this, depending on the context, activates a range of different but associated meanings.

Our next two readings trace a series of related historical shifts in the social definition of public and private. We have chosen these in order to illustrate how the relations between these terms might be constructed differently from the public/private distinction implicit in most of the discussions of opinion polling we have so far considered. In most of these, public opinion is held to be comprised of the aggregate of individual opinions on a topic of general concern. The sense of 'the public' implied by such uses is an all-inclusive one: everyone is a part of it, and all opinions are ranked equally. As a consequence,

the members of 'the public' are not regarded as being related to one another in any particular way; nor do their views, in order to be represented as 'opinions', have to exhibit any special characteristics. They do not, for example, have to be consistent, rational or strongly felt.

By contrast, the next two readings elaborate various aspects of the public/private split which prevailed in developed European societies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Three main differences stand out:

1. 'The public' functioned as a restricted concept encompassing only the enfranchised, propertied, educated and male members of the body politic. 'The public', that is to say, was specifically distinguished from the mass of ordinary people with which, in later uses, it has come to be equated.

2. Likewise, 'public opinion' was specifically distinguished from 'vulgar opinion' or 'common opinion' for which, in more recent uses, it sometimes functions as an equivalent. 'Public opinion' was to be shaped up via a process of rational discussion between the members of a concerned, responsible and restricted citizenry.

3. Finally, apart from referring to a specific social group - bourgeois men - 'the public' also referred to a specific sphere or social space in the sense that public life, and the formation of public opinion as outlined above, depended on the places where concerned male citizens could regularly meet, discuss and exchange ideas. Likewise, the opposite of 'the public' was less the private, in a psychological sense, than the family as a particular social sphere - the sphere of intimate social relations.

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Read Richard Sennett, 'The changes in the public domain' (excerpts), reading 7. Attempt to answer the following questions on the basis of your reading.

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SAQ 4

1. How does Sennett characterise the relations between the public and private domains in the eighteenth century?

(cont'd over page)

(SAQ 4 continued)

2. How did the public/private distinction change in the course of the nineteenth century, and how does Sennett account for these changes?

In the nineteenth century, the family, as the sphere of intimate social relationships, came to supply the model concept of 'the private' with which the public sphere was contrasted. Alvin Gouldner also emphasised this, although from a somewhat different perspective.

> Public and private thus develop together. To make matters 'public' means to open them even to those who are not known personally, to those who do not ordinarily come into one's sight and hearing. On the paradigmatic level, to make things public is to take them (or allow them to go) beyond the *family*, where all is in the sight and hearing of others, and which constructs a context for communication that may, in consequence, be cryptic, allusive, seemingly vague. The simultaneous growth of the public and private meant the development of a limit on the power of the public, the drawing of a firm boundary beyond which the public could not intrude. One could be a public being, with all the exhaustion and tension that generates, only because there was a place - the private sphere - to which one could retreat for repairs; a place in which one could find support for efforts that had failed to find public support. The private was a place where one could speak the silences of the public to a sympathetic and validating hearer. (Gouldner, 1976, pp.101-2)

As Gouldner goes on to argue, the nineteenth-century concept of the public sphere required, as its opposite, not just the family, in some neutral or undifferentiated sense, but the patriarchal family system. Implicitly, the public sphere was exclusively the preserve of adult males and, in this respect, it presupposed, as Gouldner puts it, 'a patriarchal-family system within which (sometimes) loved but commonly subjugated women and children helped the husband-father redefine his defeats, producing favourable, private assessment of unfavourable public verdicts' (p.102). In this sense, the public/private distinction, apart from referring to different institutional spheres, was also a gendered distinction.

It should be added that Gouldner's concern is with the development of a specifically bourgeois public sphere as the set of institutions within which criticisms of and opposition to feudal and absolutist regimes developed. This

particular conception of the public sphere has been most fully developed in Germanic social theory. Jurgen Habermas, one of the later representatives of the Frankfurt School to which you were introduced in Course HP04a, *Cultural Formations*, briefly summarised the concept in an encyclopaedia article he wrote in 1964. (This was subsequently reproduced in *Communication and Class Struggle, Vol. 1, Capitalism, Imperialism.*)

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Read Jurgen Habermas, 'The public sphere' (excerpts), reading 8, and attempt to answer the following study questions:

1. How does Habermas construe the relations between the public sphere and public opinion?

2. How, according to Habermas, should the relations between the public sphere, the state and society be viewed?

3. How do medieval conceptions of a public function differ from the bourgeois public sphere?

4. Habermas argues that the use of the public sphere transformed the nature of political power. Why?

5. How and why was the liberal model of the public sphere corrupted?

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Comments

1. Habermas is insistent that the emergence of the public sphere and the development of public opinion went hand in hand with one another. The public sphere comprised a set of institutions - the press, coffee houses, intellectual societies - in which a public opinion could shape up and be formed and, equally important, be effective politically. Such a public sphere has definite conditions of existence and definite effects. It presupposes a body of citizens who have an existence and interests separate from those of the state; that is, it presupposes the existence of capitalism in that the development of commodity production and exchange produces a class, the bourgeoisie, whose members are not directly dependent on or integrated within a state bureaucracy - as was the case with the powerful social classes in feudal and absolutist regimes. However, the public sphere transforms the conduct of the members of this class. When taking part in the institutions which comprise the public sphere, writes Habermas, individuals:

(a) 'behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs' (R8:1); that is, they do not behave like the bourgeoisie in the market place where affairs are regulated by self-interest;

(b) nor do they behave 'like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy' (R8:1); that is, they are not fettered by any direct dependency on the presiding state power, as were aristocratic courtiers or state functionaries in absolutist regimes.

The conditions of existence of members of the bourgeois class make them independent from the state yet also separate from one another. The institutions of the public sphere, regulated by certain principles - freedom of assembly, debate and publication - enable the separated members of this class to come together and, through a rational process of debate, to form a public opinion (that is, the opinion produced within these specific public institutions) which bears critically on the exercise of state authority.

To say that there was no public opinion before this period is not to say that people did not have views or opinions. Rather, it is to suggest that there were no institutional mechanisms through which such views and opinions could be shaped up and expressed as the opinion of a public with a discernible identity. Public opinion was not something which feudal and absolutist rulers needed to take account of since there was no means by which such an opinion could assume a tangible form. Instead, they were responsive to the individual pressures exerted by powerful families, singly or in alliance with one another, or to popular protest expressed, for example, in riots.

2. The public sphere mediates between society, conceived as the aggregate of separated individuals transacting their private economic affairs in the market, and the state, conceived as the executive public authority. It constitutes a means whereby the separated interests of the former may be co-ordinated into a public opinion and brought to bear on the state authority in order to curb and modify it. The public sphere thus presupposes a clear separation between a state authority standing above society and 'a sphere of bourgeois society which would stand apart from the state as a genuine area of private autonomy' (R8:2).

3. This separation is lacking in the case of medieval societies. Here, the 'public sphere' (if such it can be called) has an exclusively representative function. It is the sphere in which there takes place the public representation and demonstration of power as personified in the feudal lord.

4. The development of the bourgeois public sphere required a modification to the basis on which power was exercised. It embodied the demand that the exercise of power be supervised by, and be made accountable to, the opinion of 'the public' in the sense in which we have defined it. This constituted an attempt to make political authority - and the basis on which it was exercised - rational in requiring that it be subordinated to the principles of reason arrived at by

free and open debate between citizens who were untrammelled by social and political compulsion. In this sense, the 'public sphere' was represented as constituting an ideal discursive space; debate was conducted without regard to the private interests of the bourgeoisie in the market place, and without regard to the fear of political pressure from the state.

5. With the final establishment of a bourgeois constitutional state and, therefore, of the subordination of the state apparatus to the bourgeoisie, this ideal discursive space was dismantled, principally via the commercialisation of the media. Once newspapers became instruments of commerce, nakedly representing private interests and seeking to influence opinion by irrational means, the integrity of the public sphere was destroyed.

With the last point, we begin to touch on a mutation in the meaning and evaluation of the term 'public opinion' which occurred in the mid to late-nineteenth century. A number of interesting developments were involved in this process. First, with the extension of literacy (that is, of the 'reading public') and of the franchise (that is, of the voting public), 'the public' was both quantitatively and qualitatively expanded. To the degree that it no longer consisted just of the bourgeoisie but included members of the working classes, 'the public sphere' - the institutions implicated in the formation of 'public opinion' - became split along class lines with the development of new forms for the formation and expression of working-class views. As a consequence, the pretence that 'public opinion' was the product of rational debate between free and equal citizens could no longer be maintained. Whereas earlier conceptions of 'public opinion' had concealed class contradictions simply by equating such opinion with bourgeois opinion, such contradictions could no longer be concealed once the class homogeneity of the public sphere was destroyed by the emergence of agencies of working-class opinion formation and expression: the radical press, trade unions and political parties. Second, as Habermas argues, the conditions for rational discourse ceased once the press became an instrument which sought to form opinion in favour of particular sectional interests.

As a consequence of these developments, 'public opinion', in certain traditions of social and political theory, came to be used largely as a derogatory term. It referred not to the rationally formed opinion of a relatively restricted social group, but to the irrationally formed views of the masses. In short, the prospect which public opinion conjured up was that of mob or crowd rule.

We will explore this mutation and some of the consequences which derived from it more fully later. Meanwhile, having considered a range of varying uses of both 'opinion' and 'public', let us consider some of the contrasting ways in which the two terms have been combined.

3.4 Public opinion: some definitions

We have already considered one definition of public opinion in discussing Habermas's work. It is important to note, however, the type of definition Habermas advances. Public opinion, he argues, was a body of opinion developed, within specific institutions, between members of the same class through a process of what was represented as free, open and rational debate. This is, however, a descriptive rather than a prescriptive definition. Habermas does not suggest that is what public opinion ought to mean. Rather, his concern is to describe what it meant and how it functioned at a particular time.

By contrast, the definitions we are concerned with here are prescriptive in intent. They sift through various possible uses in order to recommend or prefer one above others. We start with two quite contrasting cases. The first comes from a contemporary American textbook designed for use in college social science courses. It is a short definition, offered by way of summary of a lengthier discussion of the subject.

> In this chapter, we suggest that public opinion is the complex of preferences expressed by a significant number of persons on an issue of general importance. Each of the five main elements in this definition is important to an understanding of public opinion and to an understanding of how public opinion is differentiated from mores, social custom, or habit, and from private interests of no general concern to the larger groups in the society. An *issue* is a matter with a possibility of disagreement that is of some general concern to the community, not just to individuals. The *public* consists of those affected by, or aware of, the issue; there is no general public as such, but there are many publics, each created by an issue in which it is interested. The ideas, feelings, and points of view of the members of those publics must be expressed; the awareness of the public nature of the issue is itself indicated in part by *expression*, for unexpressed opinions are not identifiable, not measurable, and not public. The *complex of preferences* includes all the expressed points of view that cluster around the issue and are held by the public; the number of such views depends on the psychological factors at work among the individuals in the public and on the complexity of the issue; the resolution of the complex of views into a minority-majority division is a special problem of democratic decision making. The phrase, 'a significant number of persons' relates to the *size* of the public and means a different number in each case - though not small numbers concerned with essentially private matters; *significance* may in part be measured by

effectiveness or potential effectiveness, which is a function of intensity and organization and not of sheer numbers alone. (Hennessy, 1981, pp.8-9)

The second definition, an entry in a social science encyclopaedia, is indicative of an older way of thinking.

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Read Wilhelm Bauer, 'Public opinion' (excerpt), reading 9, noting points of contrast with Hennessy's definition.

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Comments

1. The two definitions differ most radically when it comes to specifying the interior components of public opinion and the relations between these. For Bauer, public opinion involves the fusion of the consciousnesses of particular groups into a higher order, a more collective consciousness at the level of the group (society) as a whole. Because it is defined in this way - as the expression of a whole society as determined by the social and economic relations characteristic of that society - when Bauer proceeds to distinguish two types of public opinion he does so by distinguishing two types of society. Static public opinion is a feature of agrarian and barter economies, and tends to the consensual ('binds the individual to the customs and mores'), the repetitive, the irrational. Dynamic public opinion is 'the product of the city' seen as a space in which differences appear and are discussed and negotiated. When, in the pages that follow this extract, Bauer elaborates on his conception of public opinion he writes a history: changes in forms of opinion are related to transformations in the organisation of society and are traced from ancient Sumerian and Babylonian civilisations through to the present, 'the age of the masses'.

2. Hennessy's is not only a different definition of public opinion, it is a different type of definition. One would hardly move on to writing a short history of human civilisation on the basis of this definition. Nor does Hennessy attribute any particular qualities - those of rationality - to public opinion. Most crucially, however, public opinion is scaled down: no longer social consciousness in general, it is rather 'the complex of preferences expressed by a significant number of persons on an issue' (Hennessy, p.8). There is no larger, general public, only particular publics geared to particular issues. Whereas public opinion in the Bauer version could encompass 'sporadic sentiments and loyalties', 'customs, mores and usages', 'irrational consensus', 'cultivated arts of persuasion' and so on, the second definition discards all these and recognises only 'complexes of preferences on particular issues'. Whereas Bauer's definition seems hardly conducive to empirical investigation, let alone measurement,

Hennessy's definition is designed to identify a set of starting points for empirical inquiry. What separates these two 'working definitions' of public opinion is the emergence of a new form of social inquiry, one that investigates a problem, not by writing its history, but by measuring its components and dimensions. In the gap between the two definitions lies the development of empirical social science in the twentieth century.

The problem of producing researchable definitions of public opinion and the problem of the relations between 'classical' discussions and newer empirical methods are treated in our next and more extended reading.

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Read Paul Lazarsfeld, 'Public opinion research and the classical tradition' (excerpts), reading 10.

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SAQ 5

1. What is Lazarsfeld's general argument concerning the relations between modern opinion research and 'the classical tradition'?

2. Do you consider that his comments on Oncken successfully reconcile the two traditions?

Comments

Lazarsfeld is a key figure in the history of modern social research. He did pioneering work on panel surveys and on a whole range of the quantitative research methods that have transformed the social sciences in general and the study of public opinion and mass communications in particular. The problem with the classical usage of public opinion, Lazarsfeld argues, is that 'while ostensibly a concept, it actually signified only a complicated congeries of observations, practical problems, and normative concerns' (R10:2). The term 'public opinion' had to do too much work by default. As a consequence, the phenomena of public opinion could only appear vague and fluctuating, capable of infinite variation, mysterious.

Implicit in Lazarsfeld's attempt to refine the concept of public opinion, and in most accounts of the development of modern public opinion research, is a history of opinion polling as part of a broader history of scientific progress. According to this view, broad speculations are displaced by precise and verifiable propositions, generalised and philosophical discussions give way to systematic research

programmes, new measurement techniques appear and are progressively refined, and so on. Unlike many who followed him, Lazarsfeld was no narrowly focussed technician and he argues here and elsewhere that empirical researchers must avoid 'being guided too much by what is a manageable topic at the moment, rather than by what is an important issue' (R10:2). But, clearly, the new capacity to establish 'complete attitude distributions' is seen to constitute a crucial and irreversible advance in the study of public opinion. For the first time, evidence can be produced in a form which allows competing claims about what public opinion says to be tested, or subjected to rational assessment.

However, opinion polling did not develop everywhere under the same circumstances as those prevailing in America. Initially it took a quite different form in Britain in response to a variant set of intellectual and political pressures. The result was a radically different conception of public opinion accompanied, correspondingly, by other techniques for gauging and measuring it - techniques which were explicitly distinguished from and preferred to those being developed in America.

The first form of opinion polling in Britain was undertaken by the Mass-Observation Unit. This was set up, in the early 1930s, by an anthropologist, Tom Harrisson, and a journalist, Charles Madge. The MOU differed from American opinion polling in a number of respects:

1. The meaning of 'mass' in the title of MOU was ambiguous. Mass observation referred not only to the observation of mass phenomena and collective behaviour but also to the fact that such observation was to be conducted by a mass of non-specialist observers. And the results were published in non-technical books and pamphlets for a mass readership, at least so it was hoped. In their first pamphlet, Harrisson and Madge announced that ideally mass observation would involve 'the observation by everyone of everyone including themselves', and that the goal was to produce 'a science of ourselves' (pp.10-11). Effectively that meant a sort of cultural anthropology of everyday life in modern Britain, conducted by teams of participant observers - that is, by people living in the communities they observed - and dealing with a remarkable array of topics: the popularity of astrology, people's reasons for smoking, the social role of the pub, dance crazes (like the Lambeth Walk), attitudes towards pets, the abdication of Edward VIII, the Munich crisis, the role of rumour in wartime, industrial working conditions, postwar housing needs and many more.

2. The methods of MOU were qualitative rather than quantitative. Harrison specifically refuted the view that public opinion could be ascertained by means of administered questionnaires or scientifically designed interviews. The only way to find out what the people thought was to go amongst them and live with them. This is precisely what Harrisson did. An anthropologist, he acquired his field

research experience in Borneo and New Guinea. On returning to Britain, he argued that the rulers of the day knew more about the natives of Borneo than they did about 'the natives of Lancashire'. He accordingly went to live and work in Bolton - one of the larger Lancashire cotton towns - as a participant observer using techniques of anthropological field research to find out about customs, beliefs and opinions.

3. MOU espoused, in a vague way, socialist ideals and credentials. Its emergence was related to the more broadly-based development in Britain in the 1930s of a widespread interest in the views, attitudes and behaviour of ordinary people. However, there was also a degree of ambiguity in Harrisson's position. He was also concerned that the government of the day was losing touch with ordinary people, with possibly dangerous consequences. He thus thought of it as a part of MOU's function not just to 'interpret the people to themselves' but also to interpret them to the government. It is thus relevant to note that, in the war, Harrisson was employed by the Ministry of Information, using his network of MOU correspondents to advise the government on how its policies were viewed by ordinary people and how to improve the way it put its policies across.

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Read Tom Harrisson, 'What is public opinion?' (excerpts), reading 11.

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SAQ 6

1. Identify the different ways in which Harrisson defines and distinguishes public and private opinion from one another.

2. Are these consistent?

3. Why does Harrisson view published opinion as an inaccurate guide to public and private opinion?

4. What conception of 'the public' informs Harrisson's definition(s) of public opinion?

5. On what grounds does Harrisson argue that questionnaires and formal interviews fail to accurately gauge public opinion?

Comments

The article can be read as suggesting two different accounts of public opinion.

1. The first and dominant conception regards public opinion as comprising those private thoughts that can be (safely) uttered as public statements. Opinions are first formulated in the privacy of one's own mind, then possibly circulated in the private sphere of family and friends, and then concealed, revealed or modified in public. Thus, in appraising public opinion, an analyst needs both to differentiate it from merely 'published opinion', and to distinguish the aspects of public opinion that really express private opinion from those that do so less frankly or fully or not at all. Thus the central problem becomes - whether, or to what degree, 'public opinion' approximates real opinion which resides elsewhere, at the level of the private and personal thought. It is also worth noting that this public/private distinction is represented as a gendered distinction. Harrison's ordinary person is implicitly masculine; his true thoughts are revealed in what he says to himself, in his dreams and to his wife! The concept of the private is thus implicitly feminised as the space within which men express their true thoughts, and women listen.

2. The second and less developed version undermines the first view as well as the very nature of Harrison's concern to define and locate a level at which public opinion really expresses itself. This second version is suggested by Harrisson's definition of private opinion as 'a complex of feelings, often conflicting' (R11:1). The question which this suggests is: under what conditions are these relatively ill-defined impressions and sentiments shaped into some more distinct form, i.e., an opinion? In what situations is the production of an opinion suggested, invited or demanded? We do, after all, manage to get by without actually having definite opinions about all sorts of issues of which we are vaguely aware. Opinions are produced in a certain context - an opinion poll interview, an argument in the pub, a discussion of a newspaper item at breakfast, a union meeting, a university tutorial, a polite chat with the in-laws. In each case the sort of opinion that is articulated is a product of the social relations and linguistic aspects of that situation, as well as of the complex of 'private' beliefs, sentiments and inclinations of the speaker. According to this conception, any expression of an opinion is, in part, a product of the situation in which it is uttered. This does not offer any grounds for preferring one opinion-producing situation above all others as alone revealing the 'true', 'real' or 'essential' nature of public opinion.

This second version, the case we have constructed out of some fragmentary comments in the reading, offers a different perspective on opinion polls from that suggested by Harrison. Rather than describing the 'doorstep interview'

as talk with a stranger we would emphasise the specificity of a situation in which (a) speaking roles are strictly allocated between interviewer and interviewee, and (b) neither the issues which are the topics of the interview, nor the questions asked/options presented are chosen by or modifiable by - or even discussed by - either of the parties present. The poll questionnaire, rather than the lack of intimacy between a person with opinions and a stranger, is the key determinant of the distinctive character of what we have called 'polled opinion'. Thus, according to this version, the limitation of public (i.e., polled) opinion is not that it fails to reflect 'actual' private opinion, but that it cannot be taken to represent opinions that are produced in other types of social situation.

Finally, a concluding note: both Mass-Observation and the Gallup poll began in the mid 1930s. Both spoke of the necessity of developing new ways of analysing public opinion appropriate to modern industrial societies. Both hoped to strengthen public rationality and democratic processes in the face of mass manipulation and emergent fascism. And both operated under the banner of science. Their methods and procedures, their relations with other institutions, and their conceptions of public opinion, as we have seen, were very different. Mass-Observation disappeared, left no successors and is remembered now only by social historians. Dr. Gallup's method survived, flourished and spawned innumerable offspring. You might consider for a moment some reasons for the respective fates of these two experiments in social research.

3.5 Public opinion doesn't exist, but its effects are real

Our purpose in the foregoing discussion has been to show that, definitionally speaking, 'public opinion' is an elusive quarry. Any attempt to pin the term down, to fix for it a singular and unique meaning, is doomed to failure. 'Public opinion' has meaning only in relation to some conception of what is not public, what is not opinion and so on. As we have seen, there is a bewildering array of contrasts in relation to which the meaning of 'public opinion' can be produced. Yet, in truth, we have only touched the tip of the iceberg on these questions. There is a considerable array of adjacent terms - mass opinion, popular opinion - which would complicate the issue even further. However, enough has been said to make the basic point that 'public opinion' is a term whose meaning varies according to its functioning within the broader discourses of which it forms a part.

We have also argued that any attempt to determine an exact and precise means for scientifically measuring or accurately reflecting public opinion is illusory. Not only is an unambiguous definition of public opinion impossible; there is no such thing as public opinion itself. The most

that we can speak of are a variety of different methods, techniques and situations for producing and representing public opinion where the public opinions thus produced and represented are incommensurable with one another. Interviews, questionnaires, participant-observation studies, elections, referenda: all of these devices structure what may be variously classified as views, opinions, preferences, attitudes, etc., into something that is represented, again in varying ways, as public opinion. There is no neutral space between these within which one might locate and have recourse to 'public opinion itself' - to the 'real truth of public opinion' - in order to adjudicate their competing claims.

It is in this sense that public opinion does not exist. But different mechanisms of producing and representing public opinion most certainly do exist. And their effects in influencing how the views, attitudes and opinions of the members of a society are formed and shaped up are real enough. This is the perspective Pierre Bourdieu adopts in the next reading. It is a perspective which effects the displacement of concern we spoke about earlier in the course. Rather than trying to define public opinion or to devise a means of measuring it accurately, Bourdieu effects a shift of gear in conceptual terms in making the nature of opinion polls and their effects the object of his concern.

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Read Pierre Bourdieu, 'Public opinion does not exist', reading 12, and attempt to answer the following study questions:

1. In comparison with Maley (reading 1) and Katz and Cantril (reading 2), what different types of explanation does Bourdieu advance to account for the unreliability of opinion polls?

2. In what sense, according to Bourdieu, is the state of public opinion often simply assumed in the form of questionnaire design frequently used in public opinion polls?

3. What does Bourdieu view as being the main political effect of opinion polling? How does he suggest radical political parties might seek to counter this?

4. If public opinion does not exist, what according to Bourdieu, should be analysed in its place?

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Comments

1. Bourdieu is less concerned with certain technical deficiencies of various types of polling than with the misrepresentations of the state of opinion which result from

the very endeavour of polling as such. He thus contrasts the tendency to count (or discount) all 'no replies' as of an equivalent value, arguing that the significance of a 'no reply' return may vary with both the topic under investigation and the class background of the respondent. Similarly, he argues that the same question may be differently interpreted in view of the contrasting class ethoses of different respondents, ethoses which have a marked influence on the degree to which specific problems are regarded as of a political or of an ethical nature. This objection strikes at the very heart of opinion polling, rather than at some minor technical deficiency, since it disputes the validity of aggregating the opinions of members of different classes and representing these as an undifferentiated public opinion. This procedure is distorting in principle since it applies an unequal measure to opinions and statements which, at the level of their qualitative meaning, are fundamentally unlike one another. Finally, Bourdieu contests the values of impartiality and neutrality. These, he suggests, result in unreliable guides to the real state of public opinion since, in practice, opinion is formed and shaped up in relation to a field of already formulated opinions - held and advocated by specific social forces - rather than in relation to a series of abstract, open-ended and equally weighted propositions.

2. Bourdieu argues that the limited range of options provided for in most opinion poll surveys can never be justified except on the basis of a prior and open-ended survey which would exhibit the range of possible positions which might be taken up in relation to a particular issue. In the absence of such a survey, the shape of public opinion is simply assumed - it must take the form of For/Against - albeit that its precise distribution between these categories is not known. This means that there is then no alternative but that public opinion will be shown to conform to the shape which has been assumed for it.

3. The problematics of opinion polls - that is, the issues they designate as political, and the mode of representation of opinion which they produce - relate to the interests and needs of powerful social and political groups. Such polls function in such a way as to help such groups to both organise and legitimate their political actions. Their most important effect is that of promoting the illusion that a public opinion exists on a given topic, and that such opinion takes the form of an aggregate of individual opinions. Representing opinion in this way serves two functions. First, it may be used as a rhetorical device to encourage the state of opinion to conform to the shape which has been claimed for it. Second, it may serve as a way of making power invisible: the ruling forces within society do not exert pressure in their own interests but merely act as public opinion (in its manufactured forms) says they should. Such a self-perpetuating circuit of relations, in which the state of opinion is limited to exposing itself in the moulds which have been manufactured for it, Bourdieu argues, can

only be broken if radical political forces seek 'to provide people with the means of being the producers, not of their answers, but of their questions, and in doing so produce their means of defens against questions which are imposed upon them simply because they do not have any others' (R12:6). The task of radicals, this is to suggest, is to make politics 'thinkable' in ways other than those represented by opinion polls and the other socially dominant agencies of opinion formation.

4. For Bourdieu, rather than speaking of 'public opinion', it is more meaningful to speak of the state of opinion as the product of a system of forces and tensions, including those exerted by opinion polls and the forms of their use and representation by the press, television, political parties and so on. To represent the state of opinion in the form of 'public opinion', he contends, necessarily entails a degree of distortion. For Bourdieu, 'public opinion' has no existence except as a rhetorical figure, produced by specific means, buttressed with a bogus ideology of scientificity and giving rise to political effects of a largely conservative nature. In place of analysing 'public opinion', then, Bourdieu's concerns are (a) to consider the mechanisms by which 'public opinion' is produced and represented, and (b) to identify the political effects which might be attributed to these devices.

4 PUBLIC OPINION AND DEMOCRACY

4.1 Public opinion and politics

Before going further, let us first review the trajectory of the argument developed in this course so far. There have been two major prongs to our discussion:

1. We began by reviewing accounts of opinion polls advanced by their advocates and queried these in suggesting that, rather than reflecting public opinion, accurately or otherwise, such polls organise and represent opinions in specific ways. Moreover, we suggested, in doing so they tended to function as agencies of opinion formation.

2. We then considered some of the contrasting ways in which 'public opinion' has been defined and concluded that no hard and fast, scientific definition of the term was possible. The meaning of the term varies depending on the system of contrasts of which it forms a part.

Putting these two strands of the argument together, we have thus argued that there is no such thing as public opinion, but merely a number of different devices and mechanisms whereby opinions, views, attitudes may be organised into and represented as 'public opinion'. 'Public opinion', according to this view, is the effect of the definitional and representational forms in which it is produced; it is not something which has an existence prior to or independently of the forms which claim to measure it.

We now turn to examine some of the political debates that have been conducted in relation to the concept of 'public opinion', particularly with regard to its place and significance within democratic political systems. We shall review three traditions:

1. First, we shall pull together the various arguments already developed in the preceding sections concerning the political effects of public opinion polls. We shall focus here on critical views of opinion polling. The perspective which informs these criticisms is, however, largely a liberal-democratic one in the sense that opinion polls are condemned on the grounds that they interfere with parliamentary democratic processes which, it is assumed, would otherwise constitute perfectly viable mechanisms for the production of responsible and accountable governments (section 4.2).

2. Next, we shall consider conservative responses to the phenomenon of 'public opinion' more generally. Within such accounts, 'public opinion' is equated with the views of the mob, crowd or mass and the weight accorded to it within democratic political systems is deplored (section 4.3).

3. Finally, we shall consider contemporary Marxist accounts of public opinion which, in a vein similar to that suggested by Bourdieu, view 'public opinion' as a manufactured form of opinion which functions as a means of shaping opinion in ways which favour the interests of dominant social groups and political forces. 'Public opinion', that is to say, is viewed as the product of a set of interacting techniques and processes of opinion management (section 4.4).

4.2 Poll-itics

In Gallup and Rae's account, opinion polls are said to be different from, and preferable to, other ways of representing public opinion because they alone remain outside the play of political forces and the clash of rival opinions. Insofar as the polls entail any political consequences at all, these are held to be positive ones which serve the democratic process as a whole (e.g., the stimulation of interest in public affairs). In this subsection we will outline, very schematically, some allegations that the institution of polling has led to consequences other than those mentioned above, and that these consequences have harmed democracy rather than enhanced it. Our brief survey will cover points relating to the supposed influence of polls, firstly, on voters; secondly, on politicians, parties and polling formation; and, thirdly, on political and electoral processes more generally.

Polls and voters

The fear that the publication of poll results might create a 'bandwagon effect' has already been mentioned. This proposes that published polls favour the victor simply because voters want to be on the winning side. Conversely, the 'underdog effect' entails the hypothesis that polls increase the vote for the candidate who is shown to be behind because people like to support the underdog. In electoral systems which do not make voting compulsory there are two further variants. Either polls favour the victor because followers of the loser do not bother to vote, believing their cause to be lost (bandwagon effect), or polls favour the loser because followers of the poll leader, thinking they have victory in the bag, do not turn out to vote (underdog effect). It would be a mistake to exaggerate either of these effects. Numerous empirical investigations in different Western countries have produced strong evidence which suggests that there exists no statistically significant immediate influence of published poll data on voting behaviour. However, this does not necessarily mean that opinion polls have no politically significant effects on voting behaviour. A poll-induced swing might be statistically insignificant (because it falls within the range of variation covered by sampling error), and yet be electorally significant because it is sufficient to change

the result in a close election contest. Also, while it does seem clear that the publication of pre-election poll results does not automatically create either the bandwagon or the underdog effect, it could be that under certain circumstances one or the other effect might regularly occur in a particular political system during a particular period. The election analyst, David Butler, has suggested that an underdog effect operated in British elections during the 1970s with 2 to 3 per cent of voters switching at the last moment to mitigate what the polls predicted would be a landslide victory for the leading party.

Polling has also been said to encourage 'tactical voting'. For example, someone voting in a three-way contest might support party A in preference to party B and be strongly opposed to party C. Poll results indicate that party C is the front runner, B has a strong chance and A is trailing badly. The voter switches from A to B on the grounds that, since A is unlikely to win, at least a vote for B might help deny victory to C. The poll result thus induces a change of vote. Thus, in the 1983 Senate elections, support for the Australian Democrats indicated that giving one of their candidates fourth Senate preference was likely to deny a fourth seat to either the Liberals or the ALP. In fact, a number of ALP supporters (including some political science teachers!) did just this. At the same time, unless one finds virtue in blind adherence to one party, it is difficult to see what objections could be made to this procedure. It certainly seems preferable that voters who engage in such calculations should do so on the basis of poll findings rather than on the basis of claims made by parties or the press.

Poll results may thus have a greater influence on voting than is implied by the negative verdict on the bandwagon effect. But this influence does not necessarily constitute the undemocratic distortion of voting behaviours that poll critics sometimes allege.

Polls, parties and policies

In 1983 the South Australian minister for health announced that he would not decriminalise private possession of marihuana because an opinion poll conducted by his department indicated that the public not only opposed such a move but thought that those who advocated it were 'soft on drugs'. The minister regretted that the public seemed unable to distinguish between marihuana and hard drugs but thought that a tactical retreat on the issue was politically advisable. Policies are rarely as directly attributable to poll findings as in this instance. It is clear, however, that the polls have a much greater effect on political decision makers at various levels than they have on voters. Or rather, polling has indirect effects on voters/citizens because it more directly affects calculations by political leaders of the electoral costs and benefits of particular courses of action.

Opinion polls also have a very direct bearing on the intra-party mechanisms through which leaders are selected. American presidential elections begin with the 'primaries', state level ballots in which the various candidates for a party's nomination as presidential candidate vie with each other. Opinion polling at the pre-primary state can have a crucial effect on the candidates' prospects. A poor poll showing can lead to the drying up of funding sources, thus affecting the candidate's capacity both to run a strong campaign in the primary and, consequently, to continue as a serious contender. Yet polls at this state measure an 'opinion' that has scarcely had a chance to form. The campaign has barely begun, many of the candidates are little known, and the poll sample may not correspond with the relatively small proportion of those eligible who actually vote. There is no equivalent to that situation in Australian politics, but poll results certainly played a part in the ascendancy of Bob Hawke to the leadership of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party in early 1983. The main factors behind the resignation of Bill Hayden as party leader involved a shift in opinion, not of the public at large, but of influential sections of the ALP, especially in New South Wales, and of erstwhile Hayden supporters such as Senator John Button. But the polls were important in this process. The leakage of private Quantum Research poll findings, which showed Hawke to be considerably more popular than Hayden, helped trigger Hawke's earlier and unsuccessful challenge for the leadership in July 1982. When Button appealed to Hayden to stand down he cited poll results which indicated that while the ALP was marginally ahead, Hayden not only trailed badly behind Fraser in the 'popularity polls' but he had the approval of only 46 per cent of Labor voters (compared to Fraser's 69 per cent approval rating among Liberal voters).

The more general charge, however, is that continuous and well-publicised opinion polls exert a constant pressure on politicians, parties, governments and consequently that decisions may be influenced by poll findings at the expense of other and more important considerations. Instead of taking the 'hard' decisions, political leaders are side-tracked into pleasing the gallery of opinions which, because of opinion polling, instantly judges every act. Obviously, to pursue this matter one would need to refer to detailed examinations of particular decision-making procedures, examining how and to what degree, if at all, estimates of polled opinion entered into the calculations of the political forces and leaders concerned. It is important to add, however, that the literature on public opinion contains as many examples of how polled opinion was affected by policy as of the reverse case. For instance, on the eve of President Nixon's decision to send American troops to Cambodia in 1970, a Harris poll showed only 7 per cent in favour of such a commitment, 59 per cent opposed, 23 per cent in favour of sending advisors only, and the rest undecided. After the invasion, however, another Harris poll revealed that 50 per cent agreed with the decision to send

in the troops, and 43 per cent had doubts of different degrees. Factors such as the authority of a presidential decision, and the difference between speculation about a possible eventuality and the response to a *fait accompli*, evidently have repercussions on the sort of 'opinion' that pollsters measure in this type of situation.

Marketing politics

It is often argued that the development of continuous and systematic polling has qualitatively transformed the conduct of politics in parliamentary democracies, and not just in election periods. If this is taken literally to mean (a) politics have been transformed, and (b) opinion polling has been the sole or primary cause, then the argument is clearly untenable. It would be more productive to consider the impact of continuous and systematic polling in relation to changes in the practices of other 'opinion forming' agencies (e.g. the emergence of television as the most important news medium), changes in forms of party organisation and in the issues and language of political debate, and changes in the composition and political consciousness of the electorate. We can hardly engage in such a complex inquiry here. Let us instead sketch in an increasingly common way of talking about the political implications of polled opinion.

This critique is probably a familiar one and it returns us to the interrelations between opinion polls, marketing and the media which we examined in section 2. The argument goes as follows: elections, and to a lesser degree party politics, have been taken over by, or reduced to, the level of advertising and marketing. The manufacture of images has replaced a concern with substantive issues. Candidates are marketed like soap powder. Opinion polls and television have been the main culprits because they focus attention on personalities rather than policies, because they emphasise the 'horse race' aspects of elections, and because they stress the superficial and sensational. In the process, voters are treated less and less like the liberal model of 'the informed citizen'. Instead, they are subjected to highly sophisticated and intensive marketing campaigns and massive barrages of advertising and misinformation which make national debate and judgement increasingly difficult.

The alarmist interest in political merchandising stems from a best-selling and highly entertaining book on Nixon's campaign for the presidency in 1968, *The Selling of the President* by Joe McGinnis (Penguin, 1970). A number of subsequent books reiterated similar themes, namely that electioneering had been taken over by a new breed of cynical professional manipulators well versed in advertising and polling techniques.

In a debunking exercise, 'The myth of the electoral technocrats', American political scientist Richard Hamilton argues that, while the new manipulators are indeed cynical,

their capacity to deliver the goods is hardly as impressive as the melodramatic exposés imply. In fact, Hamilton asserts, their record is pretty dismal and, when candidates backed by such techniques have won, their victory has generally been due to factors quite independent of the campaign packaging. The combination of polling, image making and television promotion simply does not guarantee electoral success, though it has affected the 'style' and the financial costs of election campaigns.

Certainly, however, it is not difficult to provide evidence of the presence of marketing techniques and terminology in modern electioneering. The British Conservative Party has a director of marketing, a gentleman who has moved from selling pre-cooked meals for automatic vending machines, and Mars bars, to selling Margaret Thatcher - 'I think the big difference in marketing party political policies is that one has much less say about what goes into the product ... but, apart from that, I think its more or less the same'. Or here is Rod Cameron of ANOP (Australian National Opinion Polls) commenting on a post-election (1983) survey:

> What the results point ... to strongly is the significance of a consistent market effort in the years leading up to an election. It is quite clear that the Liberals lost the election, and Labor won it, because of longer-term communications and positioning considerations. The Liberals ... failed dismally from their election success in 1977 to establish a 'position' in the marketplace. (*National Times*, 24-30 June, 1983, p.8)

Labor's capture of the 'middle ground' of Australian politics is described by Cameron as the result of a 'highly successful long-term targeting exercise'. There is little of the classical conception of public opinion left in that way of talking about politics. It seems that polling serves, not as Gallup and Rae have it - to give voice to the common people - but as a means for conducting 'long-term targeting exercises'. At the same time, we should be wary of the sort of critique of modern electioneering which contrasts the bad present with the good old days - when politics really was politics, issues really were issues, and the citizenry engaged in vigorous but rational debate over the crucial problems of the day. It is sometimes tempting to criticise the present in terms of such accounts of the past. But little good is done by pretending that 'the good old days' existed, whether in Victorian England, early twentieth-century Australia, or anywhere, ever.

Our next reading, a detailed account of how polling activities informed the formulation of both Liberal and Labor election strategies in 1977, avoids the temptation to construct such a 'good old days'/'bad new days' opposition. Nonetheless, it shows the extent to which the impact of opinion polling on the strategies and calculations of modern

political parties involves a substantial degree of departure from the conception of democracy as a political system, within which an informed citizenry makes a rational choice between different policies put before it on a free and equal basis.

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Read Murray Goot, 'Monitoring the public, marketing the parties' (excerpts), reading 13.

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SAQ 7

1. What are the general effects which Goot attributes to the phenomenon of opinion polls directly commissioned by political parties?

2. In what sense does Goot's analysis call into question the objectivity of opinion polling?

3. Identify the main influences exerted by opinion poll information on the electoral strategies of the Liberal and Labor parties.

4. What factors limit the ability of polls to influence party policy?

Comments

It is clear, from Goot's analysis, that the polling activities of both parties were intended, in part, to produce the most favourably inclined representations of public opinion they could in order, thereby, to encourage opinion to run in their favour. In this respect, modern elections revolve significantly around which definitions and representations of public opinion can be sustained and carry the day. This involves more than a struggle to interpret the state of opinion on specific issues. Rather, at least in 1977, the Liberal and Labor parties were engaged in a struggle to define the very terms on which public opinion could be defined and shaped up. Thus, as we see with the experiments of the Morgan Gallup poll regarding the phrasing of questions on the issue of uranium, the polls commissioned by both parties sought, through the particular questions they asked, to produce favourable replies in order that, once published, the resulting representation of public opinion would have the effect of encouraging opinions to move further in the desired direction.

4.3 Public opinion/popular opinion: a conservative view

We have already noted in section 3.3 the degree to which, in the course of the nineteenth century, the concepts of 'the public' and 'public opinion' tended to become unstable. In its earlier, emergent use in connection with the development of the bourgeois public sphere, 'the public' had referred to a relatively restricted group of citizens - in brief, to propertied and educated men. 'Public opinion' referred to the views formed and shaped through a process of free and rational debate between the members of this public within the institutions - debating societies, newspapers, journals - which comprised the public sphere. This sphere was distinguished from the private in two contrasting but related ways. First, it was distinguished from the private as the sphere of domesticity. Second, it was distinguished from the private in the sense in which this referred to the separate and individual interests of the members of the bourgeois class. It was with regard to this sense of 'the private', in particular, that the institutions comprising the public sphere fulfilled a mediating function. They provided a forum in which the separated and conflicting interests of the bourgeoisie, as individuals, could be mediated and reconciled and, in the process, shaped into a public opinion which could articulate the demands of this class in relation to the state authority.

In these earlier usages, then, the connotation of 'the public' and 'public opinion' were largely positive. 'Public opinion' referred to the opinion of a socially restricted and identifiable, relatively homogeneous, public. Formed and shaped through a process of rational deliberation, it was opposed to state authority with a view to the latter being made accountable to it.

This situation changed in response to, primarily, two developments. First, in the course of the nineteenth century, there developed what some theorists have referred to as 'the proletarian public sphere' consisting of those institutions - trade unions, the radical press and, in Britain, the organs of the Chartist movement - through which a distinctively working-class public opinion was organised and expressed. This produced something of a problem for the earlier concept and discourse of public opinion since, clearly, it entailed that 'public opinion' could no longer be represented as singular and unified. Rather, there existed two different publics - the developed bourgeois public and the developing working-class public - with, clearly, very different opinions. Second, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a series of reforms and the extension of the suffrage incorporated this separated proletarian public sphere into the institutions of parliamentary democracy. This entailed an extension of the meaning of the concepts of 'the public' and 'public opinion'. 'The public' no longer referred to the member of a specific social class but to all the citizens of a democracy based on universal suffrage. As a consequence,

'public opinion' assumed a much less precise meaning. Rather than referring to a specific body of opinion, arrived at through a process of rational deliberation within a set of identifiably distinct and related institutions, it referred rather to an aggregate of all the opinions of an extended citizenry. The contradictions which had previously existed between the formed opinion of the bourgeois public sphere and the unformed, inarticulate opinion of the social classes and groups excluded from this sphere, now existed as a contradiction within 'public opinion' itself. In such circumstances, 'public opinion' could only be represented as a statistical aggregate of the distribution of different opinions rather than in the form of a specific and identifiable body of opinion.

As we have seen, such developments had their advocates, but they had their opponents also. One of the major themes running throughout both conservative and liberal thought in the second half of the nineteenth century was the fear that public opinion - represented in the form of the opinion of the majority - would become an unstoppable force carrying all before it. In the first volume of his *Democrary in America*, published in 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville argued that, in American society, the opinion of the majority seemed destined to become a tyrannical force, the reigning principle of power in all spheres of social, political and intellectual life which, as such, threatened freedom of opinion, thought and action:

> When an individual or a party is wronged in the United States, to whom can he apply for redress? If to public opinion, public opinion constitutes the majority; if to the legislature, it represents the majority and implicitly obeys it; if to the executive power, it is appointed by the majority and serves as a passive tool in its hands. The public force consists of the majority under arms; the jury is the majority invested with the right of hearing judicial cases; and in certain states even the judges are elected by the majority. However iniquitous or absurd the measure of which you complain, you must submit to it as well as you can. (1945, p.271)

John Stuart Mill echoed similar concerns in his essay *On Liberty*, published in 1859:

> Protection, therefore, against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough; there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling, against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them; to fetter the development and, if possible, prevent the formation of any individuality not in harmony with its ways, and compel all characters to fashion themselves upon the model of its own. (1974, p.63)

We can see here the respects in which 'public opinion', once it becomes the generalised opinions of an extended citizenry, comes to be viewed as the source of an oppressive social authority rather than a critical voice constructed in opposition to state authority. In other, more conservative bodies of theory, however, 'the public' comes to be equated with 'the crowd', 'the mob' or 'the mass' and is, as such, specifically distinguished from the sphere of rational opinion, now represented as the exclusive property of society's elites. Within such formulations 'public opinion' functions as a derogatory term, a central plank within conservative criticisms of extended democracies as political systems vulnerable to the dictates of mob rule rather than to the rational, sober and enlightened deliberations of a responsible citizenry.

At the same time, however, the earlier concept of 'public opinion' survived, but as a critical concept, distinguished from the opinion of the crowd or mass. It is in this sense that we argued earlier that, in the course of the nineteenth century, the term 'public opinion' tended to become unstable in its use and meaning. What the concept stood for and the values it connoted depended, essentially, on the terms with which it was contrasted and the system of opposites into which it was inserted. In some usages, it functioned as a synonym for 'vulgar opinion', 'crowd sentiment', 'majority opinion' or 'mass opinion'. In others, it was explicitly distinguished from these and equated with the rationally constructed body of opinion of a restricted and concerned social group. Whichever usage was concerned, however, the same set of distinctions was produced and the same set of political concerns worked through.

We shall illustrate these by concentrating on those uses in which 'public opinion' retains its earlier, positive implications in being contrasted with 'popular opinion' or 'mass opinion' conceived as pejorative terms.

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Read Leon Bramson, 'The concept of collective behaviour' (excerpts), reading 14. Try to answer the following study questions:

1. What are the distinctive characteristics of the concepts of the crowd as developed in European social theory?

2. How was this concept modified in the view of 'collective behaviour' developed in American sociology in the early twentieth century?

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Comments

1. Bramson examines how conservative European social and political theorists used a particular conception of 'the crowd' as a weapon against liberal thought and the democratisation of political institutions. The crowd, in the image of the bloodthirsty mob storming the Bastille, epitomises the destructive, regressive, irrational impulses that come to the fore when institutional and moral constraints are relaxed or undermined. Conservative thinkers lamented the dissolution of the old order in which, allegedly, everyone knew his natural or divinely ordained place. As old hierarchies of status and authority disappeared so, too, did the web of mutual obligations that bound individuals into communities. The corrosion of traditional social bonds, it was argued, thus unleashed individuals from reciprocal ties, creating swarms of free-floating social particles which in turn were either re-integrated into new institutional configurations (e.g. the market, with its contractual and instrumental relations between buyers and sellers) or condensed into more unstable and extra-institutional collectivities such as crowds and masses.

2. In such conceptions, 'crowds' and 'masses' were virtually synonymous, as Bramson emphasises. But subsequently the mass came to be characterised in quite different terms. You have already examined two versions of 'the theory of mass culture' (the Leavisite and Frankfurt School approaches) in Course HP04a, *Cultural Formations*. The imagery of 'the mass' in social thought is related to that of mass culture critiques but there are some differences which we can indicate via a schematic 'history' in three stages:

(a) Masses and crowds, the 'great beast' or the 'swinish multitude' were the non-civilised part of society or 'the second nation' in the nineteenth century. Thus missionaries not only travelled to Africa to bring civilisation and spiritual redemption to the heathen, they also descended into a dark continent much closer to home, into the slums and gin alleys of the industrial city where the urban masses subsisted in a state of barbarism. Insofar as opinion could be formed in this milieu, it was represented as 'common' or 'unruly' opinion, not 'public opinion' which, according to its earlier usage, presupposed education, civility, ethical standards and a capacity for political discussion which were all, by definition, absent from the masses in their barbaric state.

(b) The masses enter society: with compulsory education, extensions of the franchise, and the proliferation of medical, charitable, recreational institutions, it was difficult to maintain that the masses were alien to and untouched by the established order. For conservatives, the masses remained a potential 'enemy within',

susceptible to the appeals of the Bolshevik and prone to displays of 'contagious excitement' and other 'crowd' phenomena. In American social thought, as Bramson describes it, 'the crowd' and 'the mass' are, in a sense, domesticated. No longer seen as outside and opposed to civilised society, nor as a pathological expression of the new urban industrial order, crowd and mass take their place within a typology of forms of collective behaviour. They are not so much reversions to the primitive as intermediate forms of social behaviour, lying between the decomposition of old institutions and the formation of new ones.

(c) Roughly from the late 1930s mass becomes a term applied not to a part of society but to society itself. Mass media, mass production, mass consumption, mass leisure and, of course, mass society: the term comes to connote standardisation, interchangeability, a certain impersonal scale of organisation. While vestiges of the older concept of the crowd remain - the mass of atomised anonymous individuals, which such usages suggest, is also vulnerable to sub-rational appeals and manipulated enthusiasms - the emphasis is more on aberration, isolation, anxiety and emotional privation. A common image of the mass, in this view, is the movie audience; a collection of individuals, rather than a crowd, who congregate not to interact with each other but to sit alone, in the dark, fixated by the spectacle of life on a flickering screen.

3. Bramson attributes a different, more positive conception of the crowd to Park, for whom crowd behaviour was construable as an intelligible form of social action, often leading the way from the collapse of older institutions to the establishment of new ones.

Bramson's more general purpose in this excerpt is to argue that the more rabidly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian aspects of European mass society tradition did not transplant readily into American intellectual culture. Nonetheless, in the book from which this excerpt is taken - *The Political Context of Sociology* - Bramson does argue that the European mass society tradition did exert an appreciable influence on certain currents of American sociology albeit that, in the process, that tradition was differently interpreted and inflected in being combined with aspects of the American tradition of democratic political theory. Our next reading, excerpts from an article written by a more contemporary American sociologist, Robert Nisbet (some of whose work you read in Course HP03a, *Community and Identity*), offers a good illustration of the effects of this combination of European and American traditions. It is organised around a contrast between public and popular opinion, where the former is understood in the sense of its rather more restricted use discussed earlier in this section and the latter functions, variously, as a synonym for crowd psychology, mass opinion, etc.

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Read Robert Nisbet, 'Public opinion versus popular opinion' (excerpts), reading 15. Attempt to answer the following study questions.

1. Identify the rhetorical strategy by means of which Nisbet develops his argument.

2. Summarise Nisbet's definitions of 'public opinion' and 'popular opinion' and list the contrasting attributes which he associates with them.

3. Outline the relationship Nisbet constructs between the public/popular opinion duality and his arguments concerning the relations between representative and direct democracy.

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Comments

1. For Nisbet, as he argues later in the chapter from which reading 15 is excerpted, the present is 'a kind of twilight age of government, one in which the loss of confidence in political institutions is matched by the erosion of the social fabric' (1975, p.192). The loss of confidence and erosion of authority are, in turn, related to the predominance of 'popular opinion', a force at once powerful and ephemeral which has displaced authentic 'public opinion' and has distorted processes of representative government. But the paper does not proceed to demonstrate that political leaders do abdicate the responsibilities of office in the face of 'popular opinion', or that 'popular opinion' really can 'be created overnight' or that political acts of which Nisbet disapproves really are contrary to 'the fundamental values of American public opinion' (1975, p.189). Instead of justifying its assertions about the present, the paper simply reinforces them by invoking a weighty tradition of political thought. The principal philosophers and statesmen of democratic tradition provide the basic distinction between representative government (and 'public opinion') proper and 'the kind of government that becomes obedient to eruptions of popular opinion, real or false' (R15:1). The latter is called, quite misleadingly, 'direct democracy'. The paper thus erects a canon of classic texts. It then recites from these, repeating and embroidering its basic distinctions, in order to sustain a polemic against certain contemporary trends.

2. The distinction between 'public opinion' and 'popular opinion' is rendered several times in the reading. The two are represented as mutually exclusive, and are related to rival conceptions of the political order. In fact, as we follow the process by which each term accrues further associations and connotations, the contrast becomes dramatic indeed. Public opinion, as the political community unified

by tradition and a consensus over political ends and means, is equated with constitutional representative government authority, moral order and rationality. By combining rights and responsibilities, it is the guarantor of political liberty. In effect, this is a reformulation of the concept of bourgeois public opinion discussed earlier. On the other hand, the populist direct democracy with which popular opinion is associated masks manipulative and authoritarian tendencies. Popular opinion is fashionable, facile and superficial, but not harmless, for, insofar as it undermines traditional authority, it threatens chaos and, ultimately, despotism. Clearly, this connects with the comments of 'the crowd' and 'the mass' discussed in the previous reading. Thus we find the line drawn with what, for Nisbet, are all the virtues on one side and, on the other, Rousseau, 'the Passions', the media, opinion polls, Thomas Jefferson, the referendum, cheap talk in taverns, the American judiciary and East European 'people's governments'.

> The difference between the two types of opinion is directly related to the differences between the collective bodies involved. Fundamentally, this is the difference between organized community on the one hand and the mass or crowd on the other. (R15:2)

3. It is hardly surprising that opinion polls come off rather badly in this discussion. Polls epitomise the dangerous illusion that there really is a genuine public opinion at any given moment, on any newsworthy issue, and that this opinion can be tapped by asking discrete questions of and eliciting facts and unreliable verbal responses from, a mass of individuals. So the criticism here is that polls address 'a sandheap of electoral particles', rather than a duly constituted political community, and thus that polls measure only the sort of opinion that is the most easily manipulated and the most politically worthless. But polling is not some harmless charade. It constitutes a threat to representative democracy since it fosters the belief that popular opinion must govern and 'must therefore be incessantly studied, courted, flattered, and drawn upon in lieu of the judgment which true leadership alone is qualified to make' (R15:1). So, again, we find 'polled opinion' compared unfavourably to another and more 'genuine' form of public opinion, only this time true opinion not at the level of the private and personal, but in traditional cultural, moral and political authority.

4. It is worth adding that, for Nisbet, the distinction between public and popular opinion is not a distinction between the opinions of different social groups or classes or between the opinions of different types of people. Rather, it is a distinction between the <u>type of context</u> in which an opinion is arrived at. Public opinion is the type of opinion which emerges from contexts conducive to balanced and reasoned judgement on the part of those who take part in forming that opinion, where those involved agree on certain

ends - and on the means of reaching them - are unified by acceptance of a shared tradition and so on. Popular opinion, by contrast, emerges in situations defined by the absence of these conditions and which, therefore, lead to an opinion being formed on irrational and transitory bases. This is clearly crucial to Nisbet's argument, particularly in giving it the semblance of not being anti-democratic or elitist. However, he conspicuously fails to specify in any detailed way the social and institutional conditions necessary for the formation of public opinion so defined.

4.4 The manufacture of opinion

Our final reading approaches public opinion from a Marxist perspective and, in many senses, is the direct antithesis of the approach advocated by Nisbet. Of the approaches discussed so far, it is closest to that represented by Bourdieu for whom public opinion is a product manufactured by opinion polls which may nonetheless influence the state of opinion. The reading is similarly concerned with the mechanisms through which 'public opinion', as a media construct, is produced and represented. It also discusses the part which this socially and culturally manufactured public opinion plays in relation to the processes of opinion formation whereby individual opinions get shaped into determinate forms and have political effects. The authors' concern, however, is not with opinion polls but with the relations between dominant social institutions - such as parliament, the police, the courts - and the media conceived as agencies of opinion formation. Their main contention is that 'public opinion', in its manufactured forms, functions so as to align the opinions of the public - by which they mean, broadly speaking, the members of the subordinate groups and classes - with the views and interests of socially dominant groups and classes. Put another way, the manufacture of 'public opinion' serves to guide and channel the opinion of the public in order to render the latter amenable to ruling class strategies and objectives.

The reading is excerpted from a larger study, *Policing the Crisis*, which investigates the part played by a media-orchestrated moral panic about 'mugging' in relation to the development of more generalised concerns about law and order in Britain in the 1970s. The overarching thesis of the book is that a number of opinion-forming agencies - the press, television, the Conservative Party, the police, the judiciary - worked together, in effect if not in intention, to produce a manufactured 'public opinion' which held that Britain was on the brink of breakdown because of a declining respect for the law. Mugging functioned as the key symbol of this crisis of law and order. This manufactured public opinion, the argument continues, had real political effects to the degree that it proved influential in recruiting public support for the Conservative Party's policy that the power of the law needed to be strengthened in all the spheres of its operation - more police, stronger sentences,

strengthening the power of the law against trade unionists, and so on.

These broader political aspects of the analysis are only hinted at in the excerpt we have chosen which analyses the mechanisms by which a 'public opinion' sensitised to the issue of law and order was produced in the early 1970s.

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Read Stuart Hall *et al.*, 'The social production of news' (excerpts), reading 16, and attempt to answer the following study questions:

1. What does it mean to regard the media as 'definers of reality'?

2. Outline the relationships the authors trace between the primary and the secondary definers of social reality.

3. How do the media 'play a critical mediating and connecting role in the formation of public opinion, and in orchestrating that opinion together with the actions and views of the powerful' (R16:5)?

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Comments

1. Hall and his co-authors dispute that the news provides a neutral, factual record of events in the world. The type of events that get selected as newsworthy, the way these are represented and so on, form part of a selective mapping of reality - one which tends toward a consensus view of society - which defines the terms in which events are rendered meaningful to those who have no first hand contact with or knowledge of them. The media thus provide a framework of intelligibility within which opinions can be formed and shaped up.

2. However, the media are not the only agencies involved in the processes of defining reality. Indeed, for the reasons which Hall and his colleagues outline, the media are peculiarly dependent on the primary definers of social reality - the representatives of dominant social institutions - for their information and for the frameworks within which to interpret such information. It is in view of this relationship between the media and its powerful sources that the media perform an ideological role in passing on the views and conceptions of the latter before a wider public. The result is that the terms of public debate on any particular topic are systematically biased in favour of the definitional frameworks such powerful sources supply.

3. The media do not, however, simply pass on the definitions of the powerful without also transforming these definitions, re-working them in terms of the public idiom

which constitutes a given newspaper's distinctive mode of address. It is in this way that the views of the powerful get re-shaped and re-presented as, precisely, 'public opinion'. The press takes the definitions of reality supplied by the spokespersons of dominant social institutions and, in 'taking the public voice', re-casts these into statements of 'what the public thinks'. In this way, a 'public opinion' is formed without 'the public' having any say in the matter at all. This manufactured 'public opinion', once it has reached this stage, is then fed back into the discourse of the powerful, used as a justification for their actions, with the consequence that a self-perpetuating cycle of opinion formation is instituted. To give a (fabricated) example:

(a) Police say that violent crime is rising and that this constitutes a symptom of declining respect for the authority of the law.

(b) The press report these views and, adopting 'the public voice', state that public opinion is concerned at the rising tide of lawlessness.

(c) The police and the judiciary, citing the support of public opinion (as evidenced by the press), argue for harsher sentences, more police, etc.

(d) The press reports that the problem of law and order is worsening and, in its 'public voice', declares public opinion to be even more concerned.

And so on: it is possible, in this way, for 'public opinion' to assume a very definite shape without any member of the public ever having been consulted on the matter. When this does happen - the point at which the pollster enters the scene - the topic has already been massively predefined. When members of the general public are asked their views on the subject, these views can only be expressed in relation to a 'public opinion' which has an already well-defined and prior existence. In effect, when asked whether it thinks crime is a serious issue, whether harsher sentences should be introduced or whether respect for law and order is diminishing, 'the public' has no alternative but to agree with or reject the 'public opinion' which has already been constructed for it.

5 CONCLUSION

Rather than concluding by reiterating the central arguments of the course, we shall examine some of their broader implications and, in the process, connect the concerns of the course to those of Course HP06a, *Language and Society*. We have already noted some of the respects in which the issues examined in the two courses have been related to one another. Most obviously, our discussion, in this course, of the nature and effects of the polling interview situation has been informed by the more general perspectives on interviewing practices developed in the previous course. Similarly, our discussion of the range of contrasting meanings associated with the term 'public opinion' has drawn on the approaches to language discussed in *Language and Society*.

However, the similarities go deeper than this. Thus, both courses have exhibited an essentially similar orientation in taking, as their starting point, common-sense assumptions - about the nature of language in one case and the meaning of public opinion in the other - and, in disputing these, then moving on to open up a new field of questions. Moreover, the main lines of argument in the two courses have tended in similar directions. In the previous course, the views that language reflects reality - that it constitutes a system of names for things and objects in the real world - or that it constitutes a vehicle for expressing the thought of language users were disputed. In their place, it was suggested, language should be regarded as a system for the production and communication of meaning which has effects, particularly in organising the consciousness of language users, rendering the world 'thinkable' in certain ways to the exclusion of others. By extension, it was argued, practices based on language - such as interviews - similarly need to be viewed as mechanisms with effects rather than as transparently reflecting some pre-given reality or neutrally passing on from pre-given meaning. We thus showed, with regard to current affairs television interviews, how such interviews tended to foster certain views of politics at the expense of others. In this respect, such interviews can be viewed as a cultural form, marked by the use of certain conventions. This is of ideological significance in the sense that the effects to which these conventions give rise have discernible ideological consequences in systematically favouring certain conceptions of politics above others.

Similarly, in this course, we have taken issue with the view that public opinion polls - or elections, referenda, etc. - might be regarded as accurate reflections of the real state of opinion on any given topic. In the same vein, we have also queried the view that polls - or similar devices - enable a pre-existing set of opinions to be expressed without, in the process, modifying them by virtue of the very categories used to represent them. In short, it has been suggested that opinion polls, too, constitute a

cultural form marked by the use of certain conventions of representation which, as Bourdieu suggests, are of an ideological significance in view of the specific types of political conceptions they tend to support. Moreover, in interacting with other agencies of opinion formation, public opinion polls may significantly influence the opinion which individuals and groups of individuals hold: their political significance is, thus, clearly considerable.

In sum, both courses have been concerned to dispute the commonly prevalent conception that cultural forms passively reflect a pre-existing reality. Instead, it has been suggested, they actively construct and organise our sense of reality by means of the specific signifying or representational conventions they deploy. Moreover, in doing so, their effects are both real and of appreciable significance. In these respects, both courses have anticipated the disciplinary concerns of cultural studies to which you will be more formally introduced in Phase 2. Suffice it to say here that one of the central concerns of this discipline is with the ideological and political effects which derive from the meaning-producing mechanisms of cultural forms as diverse as Australian Rules and ballet, or soap operas and public opinion polls.

As for public opinion, it would be cavalier merely to conclude that this does not exist. It's true, of course, that there is no such thing as a public opinion which can be said to have an existence prior to and independent of the different forms in which it is represented and put into general social circulation. But, of course, this does not gainsay that there are real people who, as members of groups or individually, hold opinions on a whole range of topics. However, such opinions are never given and fixed but are rather caught up in a process of constantly mobile adaptation to one another - as well as, of course, to the forms in which 'public opinion' is held to be made manifest. Theoretically, the implications of this are that analysis should concentrate on the part which different 'public opinions' - that is, different definitions and representations of public opinion - play in relation to the processes whereby the opinions of individuals and groups are shaped and changed. It directs attention to public opinion as a field of contrasting definitions and representations all of which have a stake in, bearing on and connection with more general societal and ideological processes of opinion formation.

TUTORIAL ONE

You may, of course, use this tutorial to discuss any problems that you have encountered so far.

As mentioned on p.1 of the study guide, this tutorial is organised around a series of activities on and discussions of newspaper articles relating to various kinds of public opinion. You will explore some of the ways opinion polls are used and interpreted. Material relating to this tutorial is contained in the booklet marked 'Tutorial Documents'. You should read through this before attending the tutorial and, if possible, work your way through the suggested exercises.

If you are unable or do not wish to attend the tutorial, you could usefully work your way through these exercises after you have read section 1 of the study guide.

Case 1:

Reading 17 is a Gallup Poll and reading 18 is a Liberal government advertisement taken from it, concerning the 35 hour week campaign. You may remember that in 1981 a number of left-wing unions were campaigning quite hard for a 35 hour week as a means, they claimed, of reducing unemployment.

Questions:

1. How does the Liberal advertisement select some information from the poll, and neglect other data?

2. Think about an alternative headline, text and perhaps even graphic for these poll results, e.g. one that a left-wing union might produce.

3. Now compare your poll advertisement with reading X + 1. How are the results used differently? How is the emphasis placed on a particular reading of the poll results? How is the graphic in reading X + 1 used to support the reading of the poll? Why would your graphic be different?

Case 2:

Reading 19 is an excerpt from an article on legal reform in Australia. The excerpt deals with the role of public opinion as measured/defined by opinion polls.

Questions:

1. The excerpt discusses six different polls which asked about the death penalty. How do they differ? Do the different constructions of the question explain the different percentages who responded in each category? (Bourdieu may be a useful reading to help you think about these questions.)

2. Why are poll respondents divided into geographic region, age, sex, party preference etc.? Do you think the author is trying to say something about the kind of person who opposes the death penalty? Can this really be said from the statistics presented? What is the excerpt saying about the relationship between the death penalty, attitudes to it and deterrence from crime? Do you agree?

3. The excerpt cites a statement by a High Court Judge (para.57). This, to say the least, is ambivalent. What do you think the judge's view of public opinion is? Why might he have this view - i.e., why does he seem to both oppose and endorse public opinion?

4. Para.61 gives several synonyms or similar definitions of public opinion. Identify them and think about how they differ from each other.

TUTORIAL TWO

For a part of this tutorial, the group will view and discuss a television programme made for the Open University by Stuart Hall, one of the co-authors of reading 16 'The social production of news'. This programme - *Mugging - A Case Study in Communication* - examines the role played by the media in forming public opinion about crime. If you have time, you will find it helpful to look briefly through reading 16 before attending the tutorial even if you have not reached this point in the study guide by then. You could also fruitfully read through the discussion of Irving Crespi's 'Polls as journalism' (reading 5) contained in pp.33-35 of the study guide.

The second part of the tutorial will discuss the questions contained in the Assessment Item. It will therefore be helpful if you can give these some thought and make brief notes on the question you intend to answer before attending the tutorial.

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FURTHER READING

Many of the readings in this course have been of a rather specialist nature and would not be particularly profitable for you to pursue in any further detail. So far as the more general issues raised in the course are concerned, the following suggestions might be of interest:

BOURDIEU, P. and PASSERON, J.-C. (1979). *The Inheritors: French Students and their Relations to Culture.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. This does not directly concern public opinion but will be of interest to you if you have been stimulated by Bourdieu's work. It constitutes an example of his application of the concept of class ethos in showing how students' attitudes toward and opinions of culture vary with their class background.

COHEN, S. and YOUNG. J. eds. (1981). *The Manufacture of News.* London: Constable. This provides a useful review of a wide range of culture and ideological forms - but especially of the press and television news - in which opinion is socially 'manufactured'.

HALL, S. *et al.* (1978). *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order.* London: Macmillan. This book, from which reading is excerpted, constitutes perhaps the fullest and most detailed analysis of the ways in which public opinion on a given topic - in this case, crime - is formed and of the political significance which might be attributed to the 'manufacture of opinion'. It offers a sustained analysis of the part played by the figure of 'the mugger' in the development of a crisis ideology of law and order in Britain and of the part which this ideology played, particularly in the 1970s, in shifting electional support away from the Labour Party and toward the Conservative Party.

HOHENDAHL, P.V. (1982). *The Institution of Criticism.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. This constitutes the most expanded elaboration, in English, of Jurgen Habermas's concept of 'the public sphere' - but in relation to the rise of literary criticism rather than that of public opinion.

NEGT, O. (1982). 'Mass Media: Tools of Domination or Instruments of Liberation? Aspects of the Frankfurt School's Communications Analysis' in Woodward, K. ed. *The Myths of Information: Technology and Post Industrial Culture.* Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul. This outlines the concept of the proletarian public sphere and discusses a range of contrasting views toward it.

ANSWERS TO SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

SAQ 1 (p.14)

1. Maley's explanations can be grouped into the following three categories:

   (a) Voting intentions may shift between the date of an opinion poll and the date of the election in response to considerations over which the pollsters have no control - the erratic and unpredictable response of floating voters, for example, or the influence of unforseeable political developments which may significantly modify voters' preferences.

   (b) The margin of error may be attributable to technical deficiencies in the design and administration of the poll.

   (c) Finally, the variance between reported voting intentions and actual patterns of voting behaviour may, Maley suggests, be partly attributable to the effect of public opinion poll results themselves - or, more accurately, to the effects of their publication. In this respect, the role of opinion polls in opinion formation is acknowledged, although their precise influence is held to vary depending on whether they give rise to a bandwagon effect or an underdog effect.

2. Maley is quite careful not to state or imply that elections are more reliable measures of public opinion than opinion polls. Rather, he suggests, they measure different things. Opinion polls provide a means of estimating voting intentions at a particular time, whereas elections measure the actual votes cast. There is no reason for supposing that the one provides a more reliable or truer indication of 'the real' distribution of public opinion than the other.

SAQ 2 (p.24)

1. Their main arguments are:

   (a) the timing of elections might not coincide with significant shifts in public opinion;

   (b) candidates might be successful without necessarily having majority support (because of the way in which an electoral system is organised);

   (c) rather than representing opinions on important issues, votes might be cast on the attraction of a candidate's personality or the non-thinking, habitual support for a party;

(d) elected representatives might respond to various pressures such as the dictates of a party machine, rather than to the expressed will of the electorate;

(e) a government elected on a broad or vaguely formulated platform might claim this as a mandate for the enactment of particular measures which are strongly opposed by public opinion.

2. Opinion polls are presented as a corrective to the limitations of electoral representation, and thus as a device that enhances democratic processes, on the following grounds:

(a) polling supplements periodic elections by providing a 'continuous audit' of the state of public opinion in the intervals between elections;

(b) they indicate the main trends of sentiment on issues about which elections often tell us nothing.

(c) polls clarify the mandate problem by revealing which aspects of government policy are endorsed by public opinion and which are not;

(d) by furnishing a constant flow of objective data the polls enable governments and politicians both to remain in touch with public opinion, and to discriminate between real alignments of opinion and the spurious claims made by pressure groups and other sectional interests;

(e) the polls similarly allow ordinary citizens an accurate estimate of the opinions of their fellows and a means of detecting minority propaganda dressed up as majority opinion;

(f) finally, the polls reassure ordinary citizens that their opinions do indeed matter.

SAQ 3 (p.29)

The reading's celebration of the platform contrasts sharply with Galluo and Rae's insistently negative discussion of public meetings, petitions, delegations, etc. While Shepard endorses the quotation, 'a public meeting is the direct utterance of the voice of demos without any intermediary' (R4:3), Gallup and Rae find manipulative intermediaries lurking everywhere.

SAQ 4 (pp.41-42)

1. According to Sennett there was an equilibrium between the public and the private domains in the eighteenth century city. In public, bourgeois man made himself as a social being through contact with acquaintances and strangers. The public domain is thus construed as a 'special region of sociability' characterised by particular forms of conduct and interaction which Sennett calls 'civility' (i.e., 'Behaving with strangers in an emotionally satisfying way and yet remaining aloof from them', (R7:2). In the private sphere of family and intimate friends, bourgeois man fulfilled himself as a natural being.

2. In the nineteenth century this balance was upset, the boundary between the two realms became less distinct and the value of each was altered. The public domain was no longer seen as ordered by the norms of civility but became the site of disorder and immorality. The private world of the family became an 'idealized refuge, a world all its own, with a higher moral value than the public realm' (R7:2). According to Sennett a semblance of the public realm has survived these changes, but the whole economy of public/private has been transformed. Our current ideology, he contends, is one of intimacy in which the private is equated with the psychological depths of the individual personality.

SAQ 5 (p.48)

1. Lazarsfeld's general purpose is to argue that 'classical' and 'modern' approaches to public opinion are not as incompatible as has sometimes been alleged. Contemporary empirical methods have not simply consigned older approaches to some rubbish bin of prescientific thought. But, at the same time, there are problems with the classical tradition which mean that it can't be used as a standard by which to judge and condemn modern research. Instead, the classical tradition should be regarded as having identified some significant issues which, if contemporary scientists are alert enough to rediscover them, can provide a fruitful focus for empirical investigation.

2. Lazarsfeld's redistribution of Oncken's categories is obviously meant to be suggestive rather than to be a rigorous classification. But surely what it suggests is not so much the compatibility between the classical and the modern social science approaches as the contrast between the two. Is the same thing merely being said in two different ways when Oncken characterises public opinion as 'capricious, treacherous', and Lazarsfeld talks of people 'whose attitudes fluctuate' as compared with those whose attitudes remain constant? Does Oncken's 'sometimes united, rising up like a tidal wave

against the government and the experts and sometimes divided, concealing conflicting tendencies' (p.) really translate into Lazarsfeld's 'a statistical distribution of utterances'? Clearly not: to recall Course HP06a, *Language and Society*, the different languages within which these views are formulated clearly produce different, and incommensurable, concepts of public opinion. Modern social science methods do not allow us to answer or pursue the old questions in new and more adequate ways. Rather, they necessarily involve and presuppose new questions, new ways of specifying what is to be analysed.

SAQ 6 (p.50)

1. The distinction between public and private opinion appears quite clear although it is formulated in slightly different ways at different points in the reading. Private opinion is what one really thinks and says to intimates. Public opinion is what one says to strangers or more casual acquaintances and may be less than, or other than, what one really thinks. Further, the distinction is described in terms of public opinion being that part of private opinion that 'dare show itself', or that 'can be said out loud to anyone'. In sum, public opinion is that part of private opinion which is ready to go public. It is not what the public are openly saying at any particular time, but what they are about to say openly.

2. Harrisson's case is a plausible one but in some respects it is quite ambiguous. Three versions of the relation between private opinion and public opinion are proposed:

   (a) 'Public opinion...is the overt though often temporary opinion stated to a stranger by the private individual' (R11:4);

   (b) public opinion 'is an overt, and not necessarily candid, part of your private opinion' (R11:3);

   (c) the difference involves 'the falsification between the person's actual (private) opinion and the version he gives out in public (public opinion)' (R11:4).

   The latter two quotes present public opinion as an expression of (part of) private opinion, but one that is to some degree doctored or censored to form a 'version' fit for public consumption. They differ in emphasis ('not necessarily candid' versus 'falsification'), but both tie public opinion ('the public statement') to private opinion ('the private thought'). Quotation (a), however, does not necessarily involve any connection between public and private in this sense. In fact, the phrase 'often temporary' implies that the opinion stated

to the stranger is a product of the encounter itself, rather than being the same or less candid expression or some prior and more 'real' private opinion.

3. 'Published opinion' may reflect public opinion, and hence, ultimately, private opinion. But it frequently has no basis in public opinion at all, and is often merely an opportunistic ploy by the press to further its interests. The instances Harrison cites are ones in which the press puts itself in the place of the category of 'the public' it constructs in order, then, to be able to claim to speak for that sense of the public which it has itself created.

4. In marked contrast to most of the readings we have so far discussed, 'the public' for Harrisson clearly consists of the great majority of ordinary people, but seen individually rather than as parts of a statistically aggregated mass. But 'the public', in Harrisson's use, is not the same thing as 'everyone'. Although it is more implicit than explicit, 'the public' is clearly a category constructed in opposition to the rich, the powerful - it consists of those who earn relatively low incomes, who do not write to their MPs and so on. Contrary to American polling, the discovery of public opinion is not, for Harrisson, a matter of producing some statistical aggregation of an undifferentiated population. Rather, it is that of finding out what the real thoughts are of those whose opinions are not usually regarded as of much significance.

5. Harrisson's formulation of the problem of public opinion clearly proposes lines of investigation that differ from the opinion poll model. Because polls involve questions asked by strangers, they only tap the overt statement which can be said 'out loud to anyone', but not 'the more ephemeral regions of what people [are] thinking or murmuring' (R11:4). For this reason, the investigation of public opinion needs to use informal techniques of observation (those of the participant-observer who takes up the position of friend or intimate rather than that of the stranger) if the real opinion of the public - which may be different from spoken views - is to be discovered. Polls, by implication, are a good guide to the socially sanctioned opinion of the moment. But, by the same token, they tell us nothing of the eddies and currents of opinion that swirl just below the public surface.

   The contrast is drawn in two examples:

   (a) the opinion poll evidence of Neville Chamberlain's popularity versus the Mass-Observation verdict that private opinion had turned against Chamberlain, as based on diary entries by Mass-Observation volunteers and diminishing applause levels in cinemas.

(a) the difference between the 'privately anti-alien and anti-semitic' opinion of a large part of the population, and its public opinion, as delivered to doorstep interviewers, which is 'dominantly tolerant and anti-anti-semitic'.

SAQ 7 (p.62)

1. Goot implies that political polling tends to detract from rather than to augment the democratic process in that it favours large, wealthy parties over small, poor ones, strengthens the position of party leaders over that of the rank and file and leads to a conception of politics that is more concerned with images than substantive policy differences.

2. Given the connections Goot describes between various polling organisations and the different parties, it is clear that the activities of the former are not governed by considerations of scientific disinterestedness. Rather, their purpose is to please their paymasters. This entails not finding out about or measuring public opinion in some abstract way, but probing those selected facets of public opinion which will best enable the party concerned to gain a comparative advantage over its rivals in developing electoral strategies designed to convert the prevailing state of opinion into the maximum number of votes in its favour.

3. A number of influences might be briefly mentioned:

   (a) poll information influenced the issues which both parties decided to foreground, and which to suppress, in their electoral strategies;

   (b) it influenced the advertising campaigns of the two parties and the slogans under which they fought; and

   (c) poll information directly affected the content of the speeches of the party leaders.

4. Most obviously, as Fraser did with regard to the timing of an election, a party leader may decide to ignore advice based on poll information. Secondly, unexpected shifts in the policy of the opposing party - or other developments more generally - may require or make possible electoral strategies which have not been researched by poll enquiries, or entail the abandonment of those which have. Thus, the end of the strike by maintenance workers in the Victorian State Electricity Commission the day before the election was announced meant that the Liberal Party had to downplay its previous, poll-based plans to make strikes a major issue. Conversely, the tax proposals of the Labor Party presented the Liberal Party with an issue it had not anticipated. Another limitation on the ability of

poll information to influence electoral strategy is discernible in the case of the Labor Party when intra-party disputes supported different interpretation of poll results. This often led to deadlock situations in which polling failed to produce decision effects either one way or another.